

450
6 NOVELS BY
COLETTE



Claudine at School
Gigi
Music-Hall Sidelights
Cheri
The Last of Cheri
Mitsou

Complete and Unabridged

A MODERN LIBRARY BOOK



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The novels included in this volume are representative of Colette's major work and show her genius in its various aspects. In *Claudine at School* the clear-sighted amoral heroine foreshadows the heroines of Colette's mature novels, in what Janet Flanner has called her "girlish search for the absolute of happiness in physical love, unique feminine inventories of the senses, recorded by a literary brain always wide awake on the pillow."

The subtitle of *Mitsou* is "How Girls Learn." It is the story of a girl's education in love and her first attempts to win and keep the affection of a man of taste and culture.

Music-Hall Sidelights is autobiographical, describing in a sequence of short sketches the author's life as a touring actress.

Chéri and *The Last of Chéri* are perhaps Colette's most famous and most successful works, the story of a love affair between a very young man and a middle-aged woman.

Gigi is the story of a demimondaine who resists the arduous requirements demanded by her career but—in remaining wholly herself—succeeds nevertheless.

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CLAUDINE
AT
SCHOOL

Translated by Antonia White

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PREFACE

I have told in *Mes Apprentissages* how, some two years after our marriage, therefore about 1895, Monsieur Willy said to me one day:

"You ought to jot down on paper some memories of the Primary School, I might be able to make something out of them. . . . Don't be afraid of racy details."

This curious and still comparatively unknown man, who put his name to I know not how many volumes without having written a single one of them, was constantly on the look-out for new talents for his literary factory. It was not in the least surprising that he should have extended his investigations as far as his own home.

"I was recovering from a long and serious illness which had left my mind and body lazy. But, having found at a stationer's some exercise-books like the ones I had at school and bought them again, their cream-laid pages, ruled in grey, with red margins, their black linen spines and their covers bearing a medallion and an ornate title *Le Calligraphe* gave my fingers back a kind of itch for the 'pensum', for the passivity of a set task. A certain watermark, seen through the cream-laid paper, made me feel six years younger. On a stub of a desk, the window behind me, one shoulder askew and my knees crossed, I wrote with application and indifference. . . .

"When I had finished, I handed over to my husband a closely-written manuscript which respected the margins. He skimmed through it and said:

" 'I made a mistake, this can't be of the slightest use. . . . '

"Released, I went back to the sofa, to the cat, to books, to silence, to a life that I tried to make pleasant for myself and that I did not know was unhealthy for me.

"The exercise-books remained for two years at the bottom

of a drawer. One day Willy decided to tidy up the contents of his desk.

"The appalling counter-like object of sham ebony with a crimson baize top displayed its deal drawers and disgorged bundles of old papers and once again we saw the forgotten exercise-books in which I had scribbled: *Claudine à l'École*.

" 'Fancy,' said Monsieur Willy. 'I thought I had put them in the waste-paper basket.'

"He opened one exercise-book and turned over the pages:

" 'It's charming. . . .'

"He opened a second exercise-book, and said no more—a third, then a fourth. . . .

" 'Good Lord,' he muttered, 'I'm an utter imbecile. . . .'

"He swept up the exercise-books haphazard, pounced on his flat-brimmed hat and rushed off to a publisher. . . . And that was how I became a writer."

But that was also how I very nearly missed ever becoming a writer. I lacked the literary vocation and it is probable that I should never have produced another line if, after the success of *Claudine à l'École*, other imposed tasks had not, little by little, got me into the habit of writing.

Claudine à l'École appeared in 1900, published by Paul Ollendorff, bearing Willy's sole name as the author. In the interval, I had to get back to the job again to put a little "spice" into my text.

"Couldn't you," Willy said to me, "hot this—these childish reminiscences up a little? For example, a too passionate friendship between Claudine and one of her schoolmates. . . . And then some dialect, lots of dialect words. . . . Some naughty pranks. . . . You see what I mean?"

The pliancy of extreme youth is only equalled by its lack of scruples. What was the extent of Willy's collaboration? The manuscripts furnish a partial answer to a question that has been asked a hundred times. Out of the four *Claudine* books, only the manuscripts of *Claudine en Ménage* and *Claudine s'en Va* have been saved from the destruction which Willy ordered Paul Barlet to carry out. Paul Barlet, known as Paul Héon—secretary,

friend, Negro and extremely honourable man—suspended the execution, which had begun to be carried out, and brought me what remained, which I still possess.

Turning over the pages of those exercise-books is not without interest. Written entirely in my handwriting, a very fine writing appears at distant intervals, changing a word, adding a pun or a very sharp rebuke. Likewise one could also read (in *Claudine en Ménage* and *Claudine s'en Va*) two more important re-written passages pasted over the original which I am suppressing in the present edition.

The success of the *Claudine* books was, for the period, very great. It inspired fashions, plays and beauty-products. Being honourable, and above all indifferent, I kept silent about the truth, which did not become known till very much later. Nevertheless, it is today for the first time that the *Claudine* books appear under the single name of their single author. I should also be glad if, henceforth, *La Retraite Sentimentale*—a pretty title suggested by Alfred Vallette—were considered as the last book in the *Claudine* series. The reader will find this far more satisfactory from the point of view of both logic and convenience.

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I

My name is Claudine, I live in Montigny; I was born there in 1884; I shall probably not die there. My *manual of Departmental Geography* expresses itself thus: "Montigny-en-Fresnois, a pretty little town of 1,950 inhabitants, built in tiers above the Thaize; its well-preserved Saracen tower is worthy of note. . . ." To me, those descriptions are totally meaningless! To begin with, the Thaize doesn't exist. Of course I know it's supposed to run through the meadows under the level-crossing but you won't find enough water there in any season to give a sparrow a foot-bath. Montigny "built in tiers"? No, that's not how I see it; to my mind, the houses just tumble haphazard from the top of the hill to the bottom of the valley. They rise one above the other, like a staircase, leading up to a big château that was rebuilt under Louis XV and is already more dilapidated than the squat, ivy-sheathed Saracen tower that crumbles away from the top a trifle more every day. Montigny is a village, not a town: its streets, thank heaven, are not paved; the showers roll down them in little torrents that dry up in a couple of hours; it is a village, not even a very pretty village, but, all the same, I adore it.

The charm, the delight of this countryside composed of hills and of valleys so narrow that some are ravines, lies in the woods—the deep, encroaching woods that ripple and wave away into the distance as far as you can see. . . . Green meadows make rifts in them here and there, so do little patches of cultivation. But these do not amount to much, for the magnificent woods devour everything. As a result, this lovely region is atrociously poor and its few scattered farms provide just the requisite number of red roofs to set off the velvety green of the woods.

Dear woods! I know them all; I've scoured them so often. There are the copses, where bushes spitefully catch your face as you pass. Those are full of sun and strawberries and lilies-of-the-

valley; they are also full of snakes. I've shuddered there with choking terror at the sight of those dreadful, smooth, cold little bodies gliding just in front of my feet. Dozens of times near the "rose-mallow" I've stopped still, panting, when I've found a well-behaved grass snake under my hand. It would be neatly coiled up, like a snail-shell, with its head raised and its little golden eyes staring at me: it was not dangerous, but how it frightened me! But never mind all that: I shall always end by going back there, alone or with my friends. Better alone, because those girls are so young lady-ish that they annoy me. They're frightened of being scratched by brambles; they're frightened of little creatures such as hairy caterpillars and those pretty heath-spiders that are as pink and round as pearls; they squeal, they get tired—in fact, they're insufferable.

And then there are my favourites, the great woods that are sixteen and twenty years old. It makes my heart bleed to see one of those cut down. No bushy undergrowth in *them* but trees like pillars and narrow paths where it is almost night at noon, where one's voice and one's steps resound in a disturbing way. Heavens, how I love them! I feel so much alone there, my eyes lost far away among the trees, in the green, mysterious daylight that is at once deliciously peaceful and a little unnerving because of the loneliness and the vague darkness. . . . No small creatures in those great woods; no tall grasses; but beaten earth, now dry, and sonorous, now soft on account of the springs. Rabbits with white scuts range through them and timid deer who run so fast that you can only guess their passage. Great heavy pheasants too, red and golden, and wild boars (I've never seen one) and wolves. I heard a wolf once, at the beginning of winter, while I was picking up beech-nuts—those nice, oily little beech-nuts that tickle your throat and make you cough. Sometimes storm-showers surprise you in those woods; you huddle under an oak that is thicker than the others and listen to the rain pattering up there as if on a roof. You're so well-sheltered that when you come out of those depths you are quite lost and dazzled and feel ill at ease in the broad daylight.

And the fir-woods! Not very deep, these, and hardly at all

mysterious. I love them for their smell, for the pink and purple heather that grows under them and for the way they sing in the wind. Before you get to them, you have to go through dense forest; then suddenly you have the delicious surprise of coming out on the edge of a lake; a smooth, deep lake, enclosed on all sides by the woods, far, far away from everything! The firs grow on a kind of island in the middle; you have to straddle bravely across on a fallen tree-trunk that bridges the two banks. Under the firs, you light a fire, even in summer, because it's forbidden; you cook any old thing, an apple, a pear, a potato stolen from a field, some wholemeal bread if you've nothing better. And there's a smell of acrid smoke and resin—it's abominable but it's exquisite.

I have lived ten years of wild roving, of conquests and discoveries, in those woods; the day when I have to leave them my heart will be very heavy.

Two months ago, when I turned fifteen and let down my skirts to my ankles, they demolished the old school and changed the headmistress. The long skirts were necessitated by my calves; they attracted glances and were already making me look too much like a young lady. The old school was falling into ruins. As to the Headmistress, poor good Madame X, forty, ugly, ignorant, gentle and always terrified in the presence of the Elementary School inspectors, Doctor Dutertre, our District Superintendent of Schools, needed her place for a protégée of his own. In this part of the world, what Dutertre wishes, the Minister wishes too.

Poor old school, dilapidated and unhygienic, but so amusing! The handsome buildings they are putting up now will never make me forget you!

The rooms on the first floor, the ones belonging to the masters, were cheerless and uncomfortable. The ground floor was occupied by our two classrooms, the big girls' and the little girls'; two rooms of incredible ugliness and dirtiness, with tables whose like I have never seen since. They were worn down to half their

height by constant use and, by rights, we ought to have become hunchbacks after six months of sitting over them. The smell of those classrooms, after the three hours of study in the morning and in the afternoon, was literally enough to knock you down. I have never had schoolmates of my own kind, for the few middle-class families of Montigny send their children as a matter of course to boarding-school in the main county town. Thus the school's only pupils were the daughters of grocers, farmers, policemen and, for the most part, of labourers; all of them none too well washed.

The reason I find myself in this strange *milieu* is that I do not want to leave Montigny. If I had a Mamma, I know very well that she would not have let me stay here twenty-four hours. But Papa—*he* doesn't notice anything and doesn't bother about me. He is entirely wrapped up in his work and it never occurs to him that I might be more suitably brought up in a convent or in some Lycée or other. There's no danger of my opening his eyes!

As companions therefore, I had—and still have—Claire (I won't give her surname) who made her First Communion with me, a gentle girl with beautiful, soft eyes and a romantic little soul. She spent her time at school becoming enamoured (oh! platonically, of course!) of a new boy every week and, even now, her only ambition is to fall in love with the first idiot of an Assistant-Master or Road-Surveyor who happens to be in the mood for "poetical" declarations.

Then there's the lanky Anaïs who, no doubt, will succeed in entering the portals of the school at Fontenay-aux-Roses, thanks to a prodigious memory which takes the place of real intelligence. She is cold, vicious and so impossible to upset that she never blushes, lucky creature! She is a positive pastmistress of comedy and often makes me quite ill with laughing. Her hair is neither dark nor fair; she has a yellow skin, no colour in her cheeks, and narrow black eyes, and she is as tall as a bean-pole. Someone quite out of the ordinary, in fact. Liar, toady, swindler and traitress, that lanky Anaïs will always know how to get out of any scrape in life. At thirteen, she was writing to some booby of

her own age and making assignations with him; this got about and resulted in gossip which upset all the girls in the school except herself. Then there are the Jauberts, two sisters—twins actually—both model pupils. Model pupils! Don't I know it! I could cheerfully flay them alive, they exasperate me so much with their good behaviour and their pretty, neat handwriting and their silly identical flat, flabby faces and sheep's eyes full of maudlin mildness. They swat all the time; they're bursting with good marks; they're prim and underhand and their breath smells of glue. Ugh!

And Marie Belhomme, a goose but such a cheerful one! At fifteen, she has as much reasoning power and common sense as a rather backward child of eight; she overflows with colossally naïve remarks that disarm our maliciousness and we are very fond of her. I'm always saying any amount of disgraceful things in front of her because, at first, she's genuinely shocked and then, the next minute, she laughs wholeheartedly, flinging up her long, narrow hands as high as they'll go. "Her midwife's hands" Anaïs calls them. Dark, with a matt complexion, long, humid black eyes and an innocent nose, Marie looks like a pretty, timid hare. These four and myself make up an envied set this year; from now on we rank above the "big girls" as aspirants to the elementary School Certificate. The rest, in our eyes, are mere scum; lower orders beneath contempt! I shall introduce a few more of my schoolmates in the course of this diary for it is definitely a diary, or very nearly one, that I am about to begin. . . .

When Madame X received the notice of her dismissal, she cried about it for an entire day, poor woman—and so did we. This inspired me with a strong aversion for her successor. Just when the demolishers of the old school made their appearance in the playground, the new Headmistress, Mademoiselle Sergent, arrived. She was accompanied by her mother, a fat woman in a starched cap who waits on her daughter and admires her and who gives me the impression of a wily peasant who knows the price of butter but is not bad at heart. As for Mademoiselle Sergent, *she* seemed anything but kindly and I augured ill of that

redhead. She has a good figure, with well-rounded bust and hips, but she is flagrantly ugly. Her face is puffy and permanently crimson and her nose is slightly snub between two small black eyes, deep-set and suspicious. She occupies a room in the old school which does not have to be demolished straight away and so does her assistant, the pretty Aimée Lanthénay who attracts me as much as her superior repels me. Against Mademoiselle Sergent, the intruder, I keep up a fierce and rebellious attitude. She has already tried to tame me but I've jibbed in an almost insolent way. After a few lively skirmishes, I have to admit that she is an unusually good headmistress; decisive, often imperious, with a strength of purpose that would be admirably clear-sighted if it were not occasionally blinded by rage. If she had more command over herself, that woman would be admirable. But, if one resists her, her eyes blaze and her red hair becomes soaked with sweat. The day before yesterday I saw her leave the room so as not to throw an ink-pot at my head.

At recreation-time, since the damp cold of this wretched autumn doesn't make me feel in the least inclined to play games, I talk to Mademoiselle Aimée. Our intimacy is progressing very fast. Her nature is like a demonstrative cat's; she is delicate, acutely sensitive to cold, and incredibly caressing in her ways. I like looking at her nice pink face, like a fair-haired little girl's, and at her golden eyes with their curled-up lashes. Lovely eyes that only ask to smile! They make the boys turn and look after her when she goes out. Often, when we're talking in the doorway of the little crowded classroom, Mademoiselle Sergent passes by us on the way back to her room. She doesn't say a word but fixes us with her jealous, searching looks. Her silence makes us feel, my new friend and I, that she's furious at seeing us "hit it off" so well.

This little Aimée—she's nineteen and only comes up to my ears—chatters, like the schoolgirl she still was only three months ago, with a need for affection and with repressed gestures that touch me. Repressed gestures! She controls them from an instinctive fear of Mademoiselle Sergent, clutching her cold little hands tight under the imitation fur collar (poor little thing, she

has no money like thousands of her kind). To make her less shy, I behave gently (it isn't difficult) and I ask her questions, quite content just to look at her. When she talks, she's pretty, in spite of—or because of—her irregular little face. If her cheekbones are a trifle too salient, if her rather too full mouth, under the short nose, makes a funny little dint at the left side when she laughs, what marvellous golden-yellow eyes she has to make up for them! And what a complexion—one of those complexions that look so delicate but are so reliable that the cold doesn't even turn them blue! She talks and she talks—about her father who's a gem-cutter and her mother who was liberal with her smacks, about her sister and her three brothers, about the hard training-college in the country-town where the water froze in the jugs and where she was always dropping with sleep because they got up at five o'clock (luckily the English mistress was very nice to her), about the holidays at home where they used to force her to go back to housework, telling her she'd do better to cook than to sham the young lady. All this was unfolded in her endless chatter; all that poverty-stricken youth that she had endured with impatience and remembered with terror.

Little Mademoiselle Lanthénay, your supple body seeks and demands an unknown satisfaction. If you were not an assistant mistress at Montigny you might be . . . I'd rather not say what. But how I like listening to you and looking at you—you who are four years older than I am and yet make me feel every single moment like your elder sister!

My new confidante told me one day that she knew quite a lot of English and this inspired me with a simply marvellous idea. I asked Papa (as he takes Mamma's place) if he wouldn't like me to get Mademoiselle Aimée Lanthénay to give me lessons in English grammar. Papa thought the idea a good one, like most of my ideas, and to "clinch the matter", as he says, he came with me to see Mademoiselle Sergent. She received us with a stony politeness and, while Papa was explaining *his* idea to her, she seemed to be approving it. But I felt vaguely uneasy at not seeing her eyes while she was talking. (I'd noticed very quickly that her eyes always tell what she is thinking without her being

able to disguise it and I was worried to observe that she kept them obstinately lowered.) Mademoiselle Aimée was called down and arrived eager and blushing. She kept repeating "Yes, Monsieur," and "Certainly, Monsieur," hardly realising what she was saying, while I watched her, highly delighted with my ruse and rejoicing in the thought that, henceforth, I should have her with me in more privacy than on the threshold of the small classroom. Price of the lessons: fifteen francs a month and two sessions a week. For this poor little assistant mistress, who earns sixty-five francs a month and has to pay for her keep out of it, this was a windfall beyond her dreams. I believe, too, that she was pleased at the idea of being with me more often. During that visit, I barely exchanged a couple of sentences with her.

The day of our first lesson! I waited for her after class while she collected her English books and off we went to my home! I'd arranged a comfortable corner for us in Papa's library—a big table, pens and exercise-books, with a good lamp that only lit the table. Mademoiselle Aimée, extremely embarrassed (why?) blushed and said with a nervous little cough:

"Now then, Claudine, you know your alphabet, I think?"

"Of course, Mademoiselle. I also know a little grammar. I could easily do that little bit of translation. . . . We're cosy here, aren't we?"

"Yes, very cosy."

I asked, lowering my voice a little as I did when we were having our gossips:

"Did Mademoiselle Sergent mention my lessons with you again?"

"Oh, hardly at all. She told me it was a piece of luck for me—that you'd give me no trouble if you were only willing to work a little—that you could learn very quickly when you wanted to."

"Was that all? That's not much! She must have been sure you'd repeat it to me."

"Now, now Claudine, we're not working. In English there is only one article . . . , etc., etc."

After ten minutes of serious English, I questioned her again.

"Did you notice she didn't look at all pleased when I came with Papa to ask to have lessons with you?"

"No . . . Yes . . . Well, perhaps. But we hardly spoke to each other that evening."

"Do take off your jacket, it's always stifling in Papa's room. How slim you are—one could snap you in two! Your eyes are awfully pretty by this light."

I said that because I thought it and also because it gave me pleasure to pay her compliments—more pleasure than if I had received them on my own account. I enquired:

"Do you still sleep in the same room as Mademoiselle Sergent?"

This proximity seemed odious to me but how could she do otherwise? All the other rooms had already been stripped of their furniture and the men were beginning to take off the roof. The poor little thing sighed:

"I have to, but it's too tiresome for words. At nine o'clock I go to bed at once—quick, quick—and she comes up to bed later on. But it's unpleasant all the same, when the two of us are so ill-at-ease together."

"Oh, I do feel so frightfully sorry for you! It must be maddening for you to have to dress in front of her in the morning! I should loathe to have to show myself in my chemise to people I don't like!"

Mademoiselle Lanthénay started as she pulled out her watch.

"Really, Claudine, we're not doing a thing! We simply must work!"

"Yes. . . . Did you know they're expecting some new assistant-masters?"

"I know. Two. They're arriving tomorrow."

"That'll be amusing! Two admirers for you!"

"Oh, be quiet, do. To begin with, all the ones I've seen were so stupid that I wasn't a bit tempted. And, besides, I know the names of these two already. Such ludicrous names—Antonin Rabastens and Armand Duplessis."

"I bet those two idiots will go through our playground twenty times a day. They'll make the excuse that the boys' entrance is cluttered up with builder's rubbish. . . ."

"Listen, Claudine, this is disgraceful. We haven't done a stroke today."

"Oh, it's always like that the first day. We'll work much better next Friday. One has to have time to get going."

In spite of this convincing reasoning, Mademoiselle Lanthénay felt guilty about her own laziness and made me work seriously to the end of the hour. Afterwards, I accompanied her down to the bottom of the street. It was dark and freezing and it upset me to see this small shadow going off into that cold and that blackness to return to the Redhead with the jealous eyes.

This week we've enjoyed some hours of pure bliss because they've been using us big ones to clear the loft and bring down all the books and the old lumber with which it was crammed. We had to hurry: the builders were waiting to pull down the first storey. There were mad gallops through the attics and up and down the stairs. At the risk of being punished we ventured, the lanky Anaïs and I, right on to the staircase leading to the masters' rooms, in the hopes of at least catching a glimpse of the two new assistants who had remained invisible since their arrival. . . .

Yesterday, in front of a door left ajar, Anaïs gave me a shove. I stumbled and pushed the door right open with my head. Then we burst into giggles and stood rooted to the spot on the threshold of this room, obviously a master's and, luckily, empty of its tenant. Hastily, we inspected it. On the wall and on the mantelpiece were large chromolithographs in commonplace frames: an Italian girl with luxuriant hair, dazzling teeth and eyes three times the size of her mouth; as a companion-piece, a swooning blonde clutching a spaniel to her blue-ribboned bodice. Above the bed of Antonin Rabastens (he had stuck his card on the door with four drawing-pins) hung entwined pennants in the French and Russian national colours. What else? A table with a wash-basin, two chairs, some butterflies stuck on corks, some sentimental songs lying about the mantelpiece, and not a thing besides. We stared at all this without saying a word, then suddenly we escaped towards the loft at full speed, oppressed by an absurd

fear that Antonin (one simply *can't* be called Antonin!) might be coming up the stairs. Our trampling on those forbidden steps was so noisy that a door opened on the ground-floor—the door of the boys' classroom—and someone appeared, enquiring in a funny Marseilles accent:

"What on earrth's going on? For the last half-hour, have I been hearing *hosses* on the staircase?"

We had just time to catch a glimpse of a tall, dark youth with healthy ruddy cheeks. . . . Up there, safe at last, my accomplice said, panting:

"Just suppose, if he knew we'd come from his room!"

"Well, suppose he did! He'd be inconsolable at having missed us."

"Missed us!" went on Anaïs with icy gravity, "He looks like a tough chap who wouldn't be likely to miss you."

"Go on, you great slut!"

And we went on with the clearing-out of the loft. It was fascinating to rummage among the pile of books and periodicals to be carried down and that belonged to Mademoiselle Sergeant. Of course, we had a good look through the heap before taking them down and I noticed it contained Pierre Loüys' *Aphrodite* and several numbers of the *Journal Amusant*. Anaïs and I regaled ourselves excitedly with a drawing by Gerbault entitled *Whispers behind the Scenes*. It showed gentlemen in black evening clothes occupied in tickling charming Opera dancers, in tights and ballet-skirts, who were twittering and gesticulating. The other pupils had gone downstairs; it was getting dark in the attic and we lingered over some pictures that made us laugh—some Albert Guillaumes that were far from suitable for young ladies.

Suddenly, we started for someone had opened the door and was asking in a garlicky voice: "Hi! who's been making this infernal row on the staircase?"

We stood up, looking very serious, our arms loaded with books and said, very deliberately: "Good morning, Sir," fighting down an agonising desire to laugh. It was the big assistant-master with the jolly face we'd seen just now. So then, because we're both tall and look at least sixteen, he apologised and went

away, saying: "A thousand pardons, young ladies." So we danced behind his back in silence, making devilish faces at him. We arrived downstairs late and were scolded. Mademoiselle Sergeant asked me: "What on earth were you doing up there?" So I ostentatiously put down the pile of books at her feet with the daring *Aphrodite* and the numbers of *Journal Amusant* on top, folded back to display the pictures. She saw them at once; her red cheeks turned redder than ever but she recovered herself at once and remarked: "Ah! Those are the Headmasters' books you have brought down. Everything gets so mixed up in that loft we all use. I'll give them back to him." And there the sermon ended; not the least punishment for the two of us. As we went out, I nudged Anaïs whose narrow eyes were crinkled with laughter.

"Hmm, the Headmaster's got a broad back!"

"Claudine, can you *imagine* that innocent collecting bits of dirt! I wouldn't be surprised if he believes babies are found under gooseberry bushes!"

For the Headmaster is a sad, colourless widower. One hardly knows he exists for he only leaves his classroom to shut himself up in his bedroom.

The following Friday, I took my second lesson with Mademoiselle Aimée Lanthénay. I asked her:

"Are the new masters pursuing you already?"

"Oh! As it happens, Claudine, they came yesterday to 'pay their respects'. The nice boy who swaggers a bit is Antonin Rabastens."

"Known as 'the pearl of the Canebière'; and the other one, what's *he* like?"

"Slim, handsome, with an interesting face. He's called Armand Duplessis."

"It would be a sin not to name him 'Richelieu'."

She laughed:

"A name that'll stick to him all through the school, you wicked Claudine! But what a savage! He doesn't say a word except Yes and No."

My English mistress seemed adorable to me that night under the library lamp. Her cat's eyes shone pure gold, at once malicious and caressing, and I admired them, not without reminding myself that they were neither kind nor frank nor trustworthy. But they sparkled so brilliantly in her fresh face and she seemed so utterly at ease in this warm, softly lit room that I already felt ready to love her so much, so very much, with all my irrational heart. Yes, I've known perfectly well, for a long time, that I have an irrational heart. But knowing it doesn't stop me in the least.

"And *she*, the Redhead—doesn't she say anything to you these days?"

"No. She's even being quite amiable. I don't think she's as annoyed as you think to see us getting on so well together."

"Pooh! *You* don't see her eyes. They're not as lovely as yours, but they're more wicked. . . . Pretty little Mademoiselle, what a darling you are!"

She blushed deeply and said, with complete lack of conviction:

"You're a little mad, Claudine. I'm beginning to believe it, I've been told so so often!"

"Yes, I'm quite aware that other people say so, but who cares? I like being with you. Tell me about your lovers."

"I haven't any! You know, I think we shall see plenty of the two assistant-masters. Rabastens strikes me as very 'man of the world' and Duplessis will follow in his footsteps. By the way, did you know that I shall probably get my little sister to come here as a boarder?"

"I don't care a fig about your sister. How old is she?"

"Your age. A few months younger, just on fifteen."

"Is she nice?"

"Not pretty, as you'll see. A bit shy and wild."

"Sucks to your sister! I say, I saw Rabastens in the loft. He came up on purpose. He's got a Marseilles accent you could cut with a knife, that hulking Antonin!"

"Yes, but he's not too ugly. . . . Come along, Claudine, let's get down to work. Aren't you ashamed of yourself? Read that and translate it."

But it was no good her being indignant: work made no progress at all. I kissed her when we said good-bye.

The next day, during recreation, Anaïs was in the act of dancing like a maniac in front of me, hoping to reduce me to pulp and keeping a perfectly straight face all the while, when suddenly Rabastens and Duplessis appeared at the playground gate.

As we were there—Marie Belhomme, the lanky Anaïs and myself—their lordships bowed and we replied with icy correctness. They went into the big room where the mistresses were correcting exercise-books and we saw them talking and laughing with them. At that, I discovered a sudden and urgent need to fetch my hood, which I had left behind on my desk. I burst into the classroom, pushing open the door as if I had no idea that their lordships might be inside. Then I stopped, pretending to be confused, in the open doorway. Mademoiselle Sergent arrested my course with a "Control yourself, Claudine" that would have cracked a water-jug and I tiptoed away like a cat. But I'd had time to see that Mademoiselle Aimée Lanthénay was laughing as she chatted to Duplessis and was setting herself out to charm him. Just you wait, my hero wrapped in Byronic gloom! Tomorrow or the day after there'll be a song about you or some cheap puns or some nicknames. That'll teach you to seduce Mademoiselle Aimée. But . . . all right, what is it? Were they calling me back? What luck! I re-entered, looking very meek.

"Claudine," said Mademoiselle by way of explanation, "Come and read this at sight. Monsieur Rabastens is musical but not so musical as you are."

How amiable she was! What a complete changeover! *This* was a song from *The Chalet*, boring to tears. Nothing reduces my voice to a shred like singing in front of people I don't know, so I read it correctly but in an absurdly shaky voice that became firmer, thank heavens, at the end of the piece.

"Ah, Mademoiselle, allow me to congratulate you. You sing with such *forrce*!"

I protested politely, mentally sticking out my tongue (my

tonnue, he'd say) at him. And I went off to find the *otherrs* (it's catching) who gave me a welcome like vinegar.

"Darling!" the lanky Anaïs said between her teeth, "I hope you're in everyone's good books now! You must have produced a smashing impression on those gentlemen, so we shall be seeing them often."

The Jauberts indulged in covert, sneering giggles of jealousy.

"Let me alone, will you? Honestly, there's nothing to foam at the mouth about because I happened to read something at sight. Rabastens is one hundred and fifty per cent a southerner and that's a species I detest. As to Richelieu, if he comes here often, I know quite well who the attraction is."

"Well, who?"

"Mademoiselle Aimée, of course! He positively devours her with his eyes."

"Own up," whispered Anaïs. "It's not him you're jealous of, so it must be her. . . ."

That insufferable Anaïs! That girl sees everything and what she doesn't see, she invents!

The two masters re-entered the playground; Antonin Rabastens expansive and smiling at us all; the other nervous, almost cowed. It was time they went away; the bell was on the point of ringing for the end of recreation and their urchins in the neighbouring playground were making as much noise as if the whole lot had been simultaneously plunged in a cauldron of boiling water. The bell rang for us and I said to Anaïs:

"I say, it's a long time since the District Superintendent came. I shall be awfully surprised if he doesn't turn up this week."

"He arrived yesterday. He's sure to come and poke his nose in here."

Dutertre, the District Superintendent of Schools, is also the doctor to the orphanage. Most of the children there attend the school and this gives him a double authorisation to visit us. Heaven knows he makes enough use of it! Some people declare that Mademoiselle Sergent is his mistress. I don't know if it's true or not. What I am prepared to bet is that he owes her money. Electoral campaigns cost a lot and this Dutertre, who

hasn't a penny, has set his heart, in spite of persistent failure, on replacing the dumb, but immensely rich old moron who represents the voters of Fresnois in the *Chambre des Députés*. And I'm absolutely certain that passionate redhead is in love with him! She trembles with jealous fury when she sees him pawing us rather too insistently.

For, I repeat, he frequently honours us with his visits. He sits on the tables, behaves badly, lingers with the older ones, especially with me, reads our essays, thrusts his moustache into our ears, strokes our necks and calls us all "*tu*" (he knew us when we were *so* high!) flashing his wolf's teeth and his black eyes. We find him extremely amiable but I know him to be such a rotter that I don't feel in the least shy with him. And this scandalises my schoolfriends.

It was our day for the sewing-lesson. We were plying our needles lazily and talking in inaudible voices. Suddenly, to our joy, we saw white flakes beginning to fall. What luck! We should be able to make slides; there'd be lots of tumbles; we'd have snowball fights. Mademoiselle Sergent stared at us without seeing us, her mind elsewhere.

Tap, tap on the window-panes! Through the whirling feathers of the snow, we could see Dutertre knocking on the glass. He was all wrapped up in furs and wore a fur cap. He looked handsome in them, with his shining eyes and the teeth he is always displaying. The first bench (myself, Marie Belhomme and the lanky Anaïs) came to life; I fluffed up my hair on my temples. Anaïs bit her lips to make them red and Marie tightened her belt by a hole. The Jaubert sisters clasped their hands like two pictures of First Communicants: "I am the temple of the Holy Ghost."

Mademoiselle Sergent leapt to her feet, so brusquely that she upset her chair and her footstool, and ran to open the door. The sight of all this commotion made me split with laughter. Anaïs took advantage of my helplessness to pinch me and to make diabolical faces at me as she chewed charcoal and indiarubber. (However much they forbid her these strange comestibles, all day long her pockets and her mouth are filled with pencil-stubs,

filthy black indiarubber, charcoal and pink blotting-paper. Chalk, pencil-lead and such like satisfy her stomach in the most peculiar way: it must be those things she eats that give her a complexion the colour of wood and grey plaster. At least I only eat cigarette-paper and only one special kind at that. But that gawk Anaïs ruins the store from which they give out the school stationery. She asks for new "equipment" every single week to such an extent that, at the beginning of term, the Municipal Council made a complaint.)

Dutertre shook his snow-powered furs—they looked like his natural hide. Mademoiselle Sergent sparkled with such joy at the sight of him that it didn't even occur to her to notice if I were watching her. He cracked jokes with her and his quick, resonant voice (he speaks with the accent they have up in the mountains) seemed to warm up the whole classroom. I inspected my nails and let my hair be well in evidence, for the visitor was directing most of his glances at us. After all, we're big girls of fifteen and if my face looks younger than my age, my figure looks eighteen at least. And my hair is worth showing off, too. It makes a curly flying mass whose colour varies according to the season between dull chestnut and deep gold and contrasts, by no means unattractively, with my coffee-brown eyes. Curly, as it is, it comes down almost to my hips. I've never worn plaits or a chignon. Chignons give me a headache and plaits don't frame my face enough. When we play prisoners' base, I gather up my heap of hair, which would make me too easy a victim, and tie it up in a horse's tail. Well, after all, isn't it prettier like that?

Mademoiselle Sergent finally broke off her enraptured conversation with the District Superintendent and rapped out a: "Girls, you are behaving extremely badly!" To confirm her in this conviction, Anaïs thought it helped to let out the "Hpp . . ." of suppressed hysterical giggles without moving a muscle of her face. So it was at me that Mademoiselle shot a furious glance which boded punishment.

At last Monsieur Dutertre raised his voice and we heard him ask: "They're working well, here? They're keeping well?"

"They're keeping extremely well," replied Mademoiselle Ser-

gent. "But they do little enough work. The laziness of those big girls is incredible!"

The moment we saw the handsome doctor turn towards us, we all bent over our work with an air of intense application as if we were too absorbed to remember he was there.

"Ah! Ah!" he said, coming toward our benches. "So we don't do much work? What ideas have we in our heads? Is Mademoiselle Claudine no longer top in French composition?"

Those French compositions, how I loathe them! Such stupid and disgusting subjects: "Imagine the thoughts and actions of a young blind girl." (Why not deaf-and-dumb as well?) Or: "Write, so as to draw your own physical and moral portrait, to a brother whom you have not seen for ten years." (I have no fraternal bonds, I am an only child.) No one will ever know the efforts I have to make to restrain myself from writing pure spoof or highly subversive opinions! But, for all that, my companions—all except Anaïs—make such a hash of it that, in spite of myself I am "the outstanding pupil in literary composition".

Dutertre had now arrived at the point he wanted to arrive at and I raised my head as Mademoiselle Sergent answered him:

"Claudine? Oh, she's still top. But it's not *her* fault. She's gifted for that and doesn't need to make any effort."

He sat down on the table, and swinging one leg and addressing me as "*tu*" so as not to lose the habit of doing so.

"So you're lazy?"

"Of course. It's my only pleasure in the world."

"You don't mean that seriously! You prefer reading, eh? What do you read? Everything you can lay hands on? Everything in your father's library?"

"No, Sir. Not books that bore me."

"I bet you're teaching yourself some remarkable things. Give me your exercise-book."

To read it more comfortably, he leant a hand on my shoulder and twisted a curl of my hair. This made the lanky Anaïs turn dangerously yellow; he had not asked for her exercise-book! I should pay for this favouritism by surreptitious pin-pricks, sly tale-telling to Mademoiselle Sergent and being spied on when-

ever I talked to Mademoiselle Lanthénay. She was standing near the door of the small classroom, that charming Aimée, and she smiled at me so tenderly with her golden eyes that I was almost consoled for not having been able to talk to her today or yesterday except in front of my schoolmates. Dutertre laid down my exercise-book and stroked my shoulders in an absent-minded way. He was not thinking in the least about what he was doing, evidently . . . oh, *very* evidently. . . .

"How old are you?"

"Fifteen."

"Funny little girl! If you didn't look so crazy, you'd seem older, you know. You'll sit for your certificate next October?"

"Yes, Sir, to please Papa."

"Your father? What on earth does it matter to him? But you yourself, you're not particularly eager at the prospect?"

"Oh yes, I am. It'll amuse me to see all those people who question us. And besides there are concerts in the town then. It'll be fun."

"You won't go on to the training-college?"

I leapt in my seat.

"Good heavens, no!"

"Why so emphatic, you excitable girl?"

"I don't want to go there any more than I wanted to go to boarding-school—because you're shut up."

"Oho! Your liberty means as much as all that to you, does it? Your husband won't have things all his own way, poor fellow! Show me that face. Are you keeping well? A trifle anæmic, perhaps?"

This kindly doctor turned me towards the window, slipped his arm round me and gazed searchingly into my eyes with his wolfish stare. I made my own gaze frank and devoid of mystery. I always have dark circles under my eyes and he asked me if I suffered from palpitations and breathlessness.

"No, never."

I lowered my lids because I felt I was blushing idiotically. Also he was staring at me too hard! And I was conscious of Mademoiselle Sergent behind us, her nerves tense.

"Do you sleep all night?"

I was furious at blushing more than ever as I answered:

"Oh, yes, Sir. All night long."

He did not press the point but stood upright and let go my waist.

"Tcha! Fundamentally, you're as sound as a bell."

A little caress on my cheek, then he went on to the lanky Anaïs who was withering on her bench.

"Show me your exercise-book."

While he turned over the pages, pretty fast, Mademoiselle Sergent was fulminating in an undertone at the First Division (girls of twelve and fourteen who were already beginning to pinch in their waists and wear chignons), for the First Division had taken advantage of authority's inattention to indulge in a Witches' Sabbath. We could hear hands being smacked with rulers, the squeals of girls who were being pinched. They were letting themselves in for a general detention, not a doubt of it!

Anaïs was suffocated with joy at seeing her exercise-book in such august hands but no doubt Dutertre did not find her worth much attention for he passed on after paying her a few compliments and pinching her ear. He lingered some minutes by Marie Belhomme whose smooth, dark freshness attracted him but she was promptly overwhelmed with shyness. She lowered her head like a ram, said Yes when she meant No and addressed Dutertre as "Mademoiselle". As to the two Jaubert sisters, he complimented them on their beautiful handwriting, as might have been foretold. At last, he left the room. Good riddance!

We still had ten minutes to go before the end of class; how could we use them? I asked permission to leave the room so that I could surreptitiously gather up a handful of the still-falling snow. I made a snowball and bit into it: it was cold and delicious. It always smells a little of dust, this first fall. I hid it in my pocket and returned to the classroom. Everyone round me made signs to me and I passed the snowball round. Each of them, with the exception of the virtuous twins, bit into it with expressions of rapture. Then that ninny of a Marie Belhomme had to go and drop the last bit and Mademoiselle Sergent saw it.

"Claudine! Have you gone and brought in snow again? This is really getting beyond the limit!"

She rolled her eyes so furiously that I bit back the retort "It's the first time since last year," for I was afraid Mademoiselle Lanthénay might suffer for my impertinence. So I opened my *History of France* without answering a word.

This evening I should be having my English lesson and that would console me for my silence.

At four o'clock, Mademoiselle Aimée appeared and we went off happily together.

How nice it was there with her in the warm library! I pulled my chair right up against hers and laid my head on her shoulder. She put her arm round me and I squeezed her supple waist.

"Darling little Mademoiselle, it's such ages since I've seen you!"

"But . . . it's only three days. . . ."

"What does that matter? . . . Don't talk, and kiss me! You're very unkind; time seems short to you when you're away from me. . . . Do they bore you frightfully, these lessons?"

"Oh, Claudine! On the contrary, you know you're the only person I can ever really talk to and I'm only happy when I'm here."

She kissed me and I purred. Then, suddenly, I hugged her so violently that she gave a little shriek.

"Claudine, we *must* work!"

I wished English grammar to the devil! I much preferred to lay my head on her breast while she stroked my hair or my neck and I could hear her heart beating breathlessly under my ear. How I loved being with her! Nevertheless, I had to take up a pen and at least pretend to be working! But really, what was the point? Who could possibly come in? Papa? Nothing less likely! Papa shuts himself up like a hermit in the most uncomfortable room on the first floor, the one where you freeze in winter and roast in summer and there he remains blindly absorbed, deaf to the noises of the world, busy with . . . But, of course . . . you haven't read, because it'll never be finished,

his great work on the *Malacology of the Region of Fresnois* and you'll never know that, after complicated experiments and anxious vigils that have kept him bending for hours and hours over innumerable slugs enclosed in little bell-glasses and wire cages, Papa has established the following epoch-making fact: In one day, a *limax flavus* devours as much as 0.24 grammes of food whereas the *helix ventricosa* only consumes 0.19 grammes in the same time! How could you expect that the budding hope of such discoveries would leave a passionate malacologist any paternal sentiment between seven in the morning and nine at night? He's the best and kindest of men—between two orgies of slugs. Moreover, he watches me live—when he has time to—with positive admiration. He's astonished to see me existing “like a real human-being”. This fact makes him laugh, with his small deep-set eyes and his noble Bourbon nose (wherever did he get that royal nose?) into his handsome beard that's streaked with three colours—red, grey and white. And how often I've seen that beard shining with traces of slime from the slugs!

I asked Aimée carelessly whether she'd seen the two friends, Rabastens and Richelieu, again. She became excited, which surprised me:

“Ah! I forgot, I hadn't told you. . . . You know we sleep over at the infant-school now because they're pulling down everything. . . . Well, yesterday evening, I was working in my room round about ten o'clock and when I was closing the shutters before going to bed, I saw a tall shadow walking to and fro under my window, in all this cold! Guess who it was!”

“One of those two, of course.”

“Yes! But it was Armand. Would you ever have believed it of that shy chap?”

I said no, but, actually I didn't find it at all hard to believe. That tall, dark creature with the sombre, serious eyes seemed to me much less of a nonentity than the hearty Marseillais. Nevertheless I saw that Mademoiselle Aimée's bird-like head was completely turned by this mild adventure. I asked her:

“What? Do you already find him as interesting as all that, that solemn crow?”

"No, of course not! I'm amused, that's all."

That was that, and the lesson ended without further confidences. It was only when we went out into the dark passage that I kissed her with all my might on her charming, slim white neck and in the tendrils of hair that smelt so nice. She's as amusing to kiss as a warm, pretty little animal and she returned my kisses tenderly. Oh, I'd have kept her with me all the time if only I could!

Tomorrow would be Sunday. No school. What a bore! It's the only place I find amusing.

That particular Sunday, I went to spend the afternoon where Claire lives—my sweet, gentle partner at my First Communion. She hasn't been coming to school for a year now. We walked down the *Chemin des Matignons* which runs into the road leading to the station. It's a lane that's leafy and dark with greenery in summer; in these winter months there aren't any leaves, of course, but you're still sufficiently hidden there to be able to spy on the people sitting on the benches along the road. We walked on the crackling snow. The frozen puddles creaked musically under the sun with the charming sound, that's like no other, of ice breaking up. Claire whispered about her mild flirtations with the boys at the ball on Sunday over at Trouillard's; rough, clumsy boys. I quivered with excitement as I listened to her.

"You know, Claudine, Montassuy was there too and he danced the polka with me, holding me tight against him; at that very minute, my brother, Eugène, who was dancing with Adèle Tricotot, let go of his partner, and jumped up in the air and banged his head against one of the hanging lamps. The lamp-glass turned upside down and that put out the lamp. While everyone was staring and saying "Ooh!" whatever d'you think happened? That fat Féfed turned off the other lamp and everything was black as black . . . nothing but one candle right at the very far end of the little bar. My dear, all the time old mother Trouillard was fetching some matches, you heard nothing but screams and laughs and the sound of kisses. My brother was holding Adèle Tricotot just beside me and she kept on sighing like anything and saying "Let go of me, Eugène" in a muffled voice as if she'd

got her skirts over her head. And that fat Féfed and his partner had fallen over on the floor. They were laughing and laughing, so much that they simply couldn't get up again!"

"What about you and Montassuy?"

Claire turned red with belated modesty.

"Ah, that's just what I was going to tell you. . . . The first minute, he was so surprised to see the lamps go out that he only kept on holding my hand. Then he put his arm round my waist again and said very quietly: 'Don't be frightened.' I didn't say a word and I could feel him bending over me and kissing my cheeks. Ever so gently, feeling his way, and it was actually so dark that he made a mistake (Claire, you little hypocrite!) and kissed my mouth. I enjoyed it so much—it made me feel simply marvellous. . . . In fact I was so excited that I nearly fell over and he had to hold me up by hugging me tighter still. Oh! he's nice, I love him!"

"Well, what happened after that, you slut?"

"After that, old mother Trouillard lit the lamps again, grumbling like anything. She swore that if such a thing ever happened again, she'd bring a complaint and they'd have the dances stopped."

"The fact is, it really was going a bit far! . . . Ssh . . . be quiet. . . . Who's that coming?"

We were sitting behind the briar-hedge, quite near the road that ran a couple of yards below us. There was a bench on the edge of the ditch so it was a marvellous hide-out for listening without being seen.

"It's those two masters!"

Yes, it was Rabastens and the gloomy Armand Duplessis who were walking along and talking. What an un hoped-for bit of luck! The coxcomb, Antonin, wanted to sit down on that bench because of the pale sunshine that had warmed him a little. We were about to hear their conversation and we shuddered with joy in our field, right above their heads.

"Ah!" said the southerner with satisfaction, "one's quite *warm* here. Don't you agree?"

Armand muttered some vague remark. The man from Mar-

seilles started up again. He was going to do all the talking, I was certain!

"You know, *I* like this part of the world. Those two school-mistress ladies are extremely pleasant. I admit Mademoiselle Sergent is ugly! But that little Mademoiselle Aimée is a smart girl! I feel decidedly pleased with myself when she looks at me."

The sham Richelieu sat up straight; his tongue was loosened:

"Yes, she's attractive, and so charming! She's always smiling and she chatters away like a hedge-sparrow."

But he promptly regretted his expansiveness and added in a different voice: "She's a very charming young lady. You're certainly going to turn her head, Don Juan!"

I nearly burst out laughing. Rabastens as Don Juan! I had a vision of him with his round head and plump cheeks adorned with a plumed hat. . . . Up there, straining towards the road, the two of us laughed at each other with our eyes, without moving a muscle of our faces.

"But, goodness me," went on the heartbreaker of the elementary school, "she's not the only pretty girl round here. Anyone would think you hadn't noticed them! The other day, in the classroom, Mademoiselle Claudine came in and sang quite charmingly (I may say that I know what I'm talking about, eh?) and she's not a girl you'd overlook, with that hair flowing down her back and all round her and those very naughty brown eyes! My dear chap, I believe that girl knows more about things she oughtn't to know than she does about geography!"

I gave a little start of astonishment and we might easily have been discovered for Claire let off a laugh like a gas-escape which might have been overheard. Rabastens fidgeted on his bench beside the absorbed Duplessis and whispered something in his ear, laughing in a ribald way. The other smiled; they got up; they went away. The two of us up there were in ecstasies. We danced a war-dance of joy, as much to warm ourselves as to congratulate ourselves on this delicious piece of spying.

On my way home, I was already ruminating on various alluring tricks to excite that hulking ultra-inflammable Antonin still more. It would be something to pass the time during recreation

when it rained. And I who believed he was in process of plotting the seduction of Mademoiselle Lanthénay! I was delighted that he wasn't trying to make up to her, for that little Aimée struck me as being so amorous that even a Rabastens might have succeeded—who knows? It's true that Richelieu was even more smitten with her than I had supposed.

At seven o'clock in the morning, I arrived at school. It was my turn to light the fire, worse luck! That meant breaking up firewood in the shed and ruining one's hands; carrying logs, blowing on the flames and getting stinging smoke in one's eyes. . . . Good gracious, the first new building was already rising high and the boys' school, identical with it, had got most of its roof on! Our poor old half-demolished school looked like a tiny hovel by these two buildings that had so quickly sprouted out of the ground. The lanky Anaïs joined me and we went off to break up firewood together.

"D'you know, Claudine, there's a second assistant mistress arriving today, and we're all going to be forced out of house and home. They're going to give us classes in the Infants' School."

"What a brilliant idea! We shall catch fleas and lice. It's simply filthy over there."

"Yes, but we'll be nearer the boys' classroom, old thing."

(Anaïs really is shameless! However, she's perfectly right.)

"That's true. Now, you twopenny-halfpenny fire, are you going to catch or not? I've been bursting my lungs for the last ten minutes. Ah, I bet Monsieur Rabastens blazes up a lot quicker than you do!"

Little by little, the fire made up its mind to burn. The pupils arrived; Mademoiselle Sergent was late (Why? It was the first time). She came down at last, answered our "Good morning" with a preoccupied air, then sat down at her desk saying: "To your places" without looking at us and obviously without giving us a thought. I copied down my problems while I asked myself what thoughts were troubling her and I noticed, with uneasy surprise, that from time to time she darted quick looks at me—looks that were at once furious and vaguely gratified. Whatever could be up? I was not comfortable in my mind: not at all. I

began to search my conscience. . . . I couldn't think of anything except that she'd watched us going off for our English lesson, Mademoiselle Lanthénay and me, with a barely-concealed, almost rueful anger. Aha! so we were not to be left in peace, my little Aimée and I? Yet we were doing nothing wrong! Our last English lesson had been so delightful! We hadn't even opened the dictionary, or the *Selection of Phrases in Common Use*, or the exercise-book. . . .

I meditated, inwardly raging as I copied down my problems in wildly untidy writing. Anaïs was surreptitiously eyeing me, obviously guessing something was up. I looked again at that terrible Redhead with the jealous eyes as I picked up my pen which I'd dropped on the floor by a lucky piece of clumsiness. But . . . but she'd been crying. . . . I couldn't possibly be mistaken! Then why those angry, yet almost pleased glances? This was becoming unbearable; it was absolutely essential to question Aimée as soon as possible. I didn't give another thought to the problem to be transcribed:

“. . . A workman is planting stakes to make a fence. He plants them at such a distance from each other that the bucket of tar, in which he dips their lower ends to a depth of 30 centimetres, is empty at the end of 3 hours. Given that the quantity of tar which remains on the stake equals 10 cubic centimetres, that the bucket is a cylinder whose radius at the base is 0.15 metres and whose height is 0.75 metres and is three-quarters full, that the workman dips 40 stakes an hour and takes about 8 minutes' rest during that time, what is the number of stakes and what is the area of the property which is in the form of a perfect square? State also what would be the number of stakes necessary if they were planted 10 centimetres further apart. State also the cost of this operation in both cases, if the stakes cost 3 francs a hundred and if the workman is paid 50 centimes an hour.”

Must one also say if the workman is happily married? Oh, what unwholesome imagination, what depraved brain incubates those revolting problems with which they torture us? I detest

them! And the workmen who band together to complicate the amount of work of which they are capable, who divide themselves into two squads, one of which uses one-third more strength than the other, while the other, by way of compensation, works two hours longer! And the number of needles a seamstress uses in twenty-five years when she uses needles at 50 centimes a packet for eleven years, and needles at 75 centimes for the rest of the time but if the ones at 75 centimes are . . . etc., etc. . . . And the locomotives that diabolically complicate their speeds, their times of departure and the state of health of their drivers! Odious suppositions, improbable hypotheses that have made me refractory to arithmetic for the rest of my life!

"Anaïs, come up to the blackboard."

The lanky bean-pole stood and made a secret grimace, like a cat about to be sick, in my direction. Nobody likes "coming up to the blackboard" under the black, watchful eye of Mademoiselle Sergent.

"*Work out the problem.*"

Anaïs "worked it out" and explained it. I took advantage of this to study the headmistress at my leisure: her eyes glittered, her red hair blazed. . . . If only I could have seen Aimée Lanthénay before class! The problem was finished at last, thank goodness. Anaïs breathed again and returned to her place.

"Claudine, come to the blackboard. Write down the fraction

$\frac{3325}{5712}, \frac{806}{925}, \frac{14}{56}, \frac{302}{1052}$ (Lord preserve me from fractions divisi-

ble by 7 and by 11, also from those divisible by 5, by 9 and by 4 and 6, and by 1·127) and find their highest common factor."

That was what I had been dreading. I began dismally and I made some idiotic blunders because my mind wasn't on what I was doing. How swiftly they were reprimanded by a sharp movement of the hand or a frown, those small lapses I permitted myself! At last I got through it and returned to my place, followed by a "No witticisms here please!" because I'd replied to her observation "You're forgetting to wipe out the ciphers" with:

"Ciphers must always be wiped out—they deserve to be."

After me, Marie Belhomme went up to the blackboard and produced howler after howler with the utmost good faith. As usual, she was voluble and completely self-confident when wildly out of her depth; flushed and undecided when she remembered the previous lesson.

The door of the small classroom opened and Mademoiselle Lanthénay entered. I stared at her avidly. Oh, those poor golden eyes had been crying and their lids were swollen! Those dear eyes shot one scared look at me and were then hurriedly averted. I was left in utter consternation; heavens, whatever could *She* have been doing to her? I turned red with rage, so much so that Anaïs noticed and gave a low, sneering laugh. The sorrowful Aimée asked Mademoiselle Sergent for a book and the latter gave it to her with marked alacrity, her cheeks turning a deeper crimson as she did so. What could all that mean? When I thought that the English lesson did not take place till tomorrow, I was more tormented by anxiety than ever. But what was the good? There was absolutely nothing I could do. Mademoiselle Lanthénay returned to her own classroom.

"Girls!" announced the wicked Redhead. "Get out your school-books and your exercise-books. We are going to be forced to take refuge for the time being in the Infants' School."

Promptly all the girls began to bustle about with as much frenzied energy as if their stockings were on fire. People shoved each other and pinched each other, benches were pushed askew, books clattered to the floor and we scooped them up in heaps into our big aprons. That gawk Anaïs watched me pile up my load, carrying her own luggage in her arms; then she deftly tweaked the corner of my apron and the whole lot collapsed.

She preserved her expression of complete detachment and earnestly contemplated three builders who were throwing tiles at each other in the playground. I was scolded for my clumsiness and, two minutes later, that pest Anaïs tried the same experiment on Marie Belhomme. Marie screamed so loud that she got some pages of Ancient History to copy out. At last our chattering,

trampling horde crossed the playground and went into the Infants' School. I wrinkled my nose: it was dirty. Hastily cleaned up for us, it still smelt of ill-kept children. Let's hope the "time being" isn't going to last too long!

Anaïs put down her books and promptly verified the fact that the windows looked out on the Headmaster's garden. As for me, I'd no time to waste in contemplating the assistant-masters; I was too anxious about the troubles I foreboded.

We returned to the old classroom with as much noise as a herd of escaped bullocks and we transported the tables. They were so old and so heavy that we bumped and banged them about as much as possible in the hope that one of them at least would completely come to bits and collapse in worm-eaten fragments. Vain hope! They all arrived whole. This was not our fault.

We didn't do much work that morning, which was one good thing. At eleven, when we went home, I prowled about trying to catch a glimpse of Mademoiselle Lanthénay, but without success. Had *She* put her under lock and key then? I went off to lunch so seething with suppressed rage that even Papa noticed it and asked me if I had a temperature. . . . Then I returned to school very early, at quarter-past twelve, and hung about, bored, among the few children who were there; country girls who were lunching at school off hard-boiled eggs, bacon, bread-and-treacle and fruit. And I waited vainly, torturing myself with anxiety!

Antonin Rabastens came in (at least this made a diversion) and bowed to me with all the grace of a dancing bear.

"A thousand pardons, Mademoiselle. By the way, haven't the lady *teacherrs* come down yet?"

"No, Sir, I'm waiting for them. I hope they won't be long for 'absence is the greatest of all ills!' " I had already expatiated half a dozen times on this aphorism of La Fontaine's in French essays which had been highly commended.

I spoke with a sweet seriousness. The handsome Marseillais

listened, with an uneasy look on his kindly face. (He'll begin to think I'm a bit crazy, too.) He changed the subject.

"Mademoiselle, I've been told that you read a great deal. Does your father possess a large library?"

"Yes, Sir, two thousand, three hundred and seven volumes precisely."

"No doubt you know a great many interesting things. And I realised at once, the other day—when you sang so charmingly—that you had ideas far beyond your age."

(Heavens, what an idiot! Why couldn't he take himself off? Ah! I was forgetting he was a little in love with me. I decided to be more amiable.)

"But you yourself, Sir, I've been told you have a beautiful baritone voice. We hear you singing in your room sometimes when the builders aren't making a din."

He turned red as a poppy with pleasure and protested with enraptured modesty. He wriggled as he exclaimed:

"Oh, Mademoiselle! . . . As it happens, you'll soon be able to judge for yourself, for Mademoiselle Sergent has asked me to give singing-lessons to the older girls who are studying for their certificate. On Thursdays and Sundays. We're going to begin next week."

What luck! If I had not been so preoccupied, it would have been thrilling to tell the news to the others who knew nothing about it as yet. How Anaïs would drench herself in eau-de-Cologne and bite her lips next Thursday! How she would pull in her leather belt and coo as she sang!

"What? But I know nothing whatever about it! Mademoiselle Sergent hasn't said a word to us."

"Oh! Perhaps I shouldn't have mentioned it? Would you be good enough to pretend you don't know?"

He implored me with ingratiating movements of his torso and I shook my head to fling back my curls which weren't in the least in my way. This hint of a secret between us threw him into ecstasies. It was obviously going to serve as a pretext for glances full of understanding—exceedingly commonplace understanding

on his part. He went off, carrying himself proudly, with a farewell that already had a new touch of familiarity.

"Good-bye, Mademoiselle Claudine."

"Good-bye, Sir."

At half-past twelve, the rest of the class arrived and there was still no sign of Aimée. I refused to play, pretending that I had a headache, and, inwardly, I chafed.

Oh! Oh! Whatever did I see? The two of them had come down, Aimée and her redoubtable chief; they had come down and were crossing the playground. And the Redhead had taken Mademoiselle Lanthénay's arm—an unheard-of proceeding! Mademoiselle Sergent was talking very softly to her assistant who, still a little scared, was raising her eyes towards the other who was much taller than herself. Those eyes already looked reassured and pretty again. The spectacle of this idyll turned my anxiety to chagrin. Before they had quite reached the door, I rushed outside and hurled myself into the midst of a wild game of "Wolf", yelling "I'm playing!" as if I were yelling "Fire!" And, until the bell rang for class, I galloped till I was out of breath, now chasing, now being chased, doing all I could to stop myself from thinking.

During the game, I caught sight of the head of Rabastens. He was watching over the wall and enjoying the sight of these big girls running about and showing—some, like Marie Belhomme, unconsciously and others, like the gawky Anaïs, very consciously indeed—calves that were pretty or ludicrous. The amiable Antonin honoured me with a gracious smile, an excessively gracious one. I did not think it necessary to return it, on account of my companions, but I arched my chest and tossed my curls. It was essential to keep this young man entertained. (In any case, he seems to me a born blunderer and destined to put his foot in it on every conceivable occasion.) Anaïs, who had noticed him too, took to kicking up her skirts as she ran so as to exhibit legs which, however, were far from attractive, also to laughing and uttering bird-like cries. She would have acted flirtatiously in the presence of a plough-ox!

We went indoors and opened our exercise-books, still panting

from our exertions. But, after a quarter of an hour, Mademoiselle Sergent's mother appeared and announced to her daughter, in a barbaric dialect, that two new girls had arrived. The class bubbled over with excitement: two "new ones" to tease! And Mademoiselle left the room, very politely asking Mademoiselle Lanthénay to look after the class. Aimée arrived and I sought her eyes so as to smile at her with all my anxious tenderness. But she gave me back a far from confident look and my heart swelled absurdly as I bent over my knitting. . . . I've never dropped so many stitches! I dropped so many that I had to go and ask Mademoiselle Aimée for help. While she was trying to remedy my mistakes, I whispered to her: "Good afternoon, my sweet darling little Mademoiselle. . . . Heavens, whatever's the matter? I'm worn to shreds with not being able to speak to you." She looked round her uneasily and answered, very low:

"I can't tell you anything now. Tomorrow, at our lesson."

"I'll never be able to wait till tomorrow! Suppose I pretend Papa wants to use his library tomorrow and ask if you can give me my lesson this evening?"

"No. . . . All right, yes, ask her. But go back to your place at once—the big ones are staring at us."

I said "Thank you" out loud to her and went and sat down again. She was right. That gawk Anaïs was watching us closely, trying to guess what had been going on these last two or three days.

Mademoiselle Sergent returned at last, accompanied by two insignificant young things whose arrival caused a little stir on the benches.

She installed these newcomers in their places. The minutes dragged slowly by.

When, at last, it struck four, I went straight off to find Mademoiselle Sergent and I asked her, in one breathless burst:

"Mademoiselle, it would be awfully kind of you if you'd let Mademoiselle Lanthénay give me my lesson tonight instead of tomorrow night, Papa's got someone coming to talk business in the library so we won't be able to stay there."

Ouf! I had brought out my sentence without pausing for

breath. Mademoiselle frowned, studied my face for a moment, then made up her mind:

"Very well. Go and tell Mademoiselle Lanthénay."

I rushed off and did so. She put on her hat and coat and I bore her off, quivering with anxiety to know all.

"Ah, how glad I am to have you to myself for a little. Tell me quick, whatever's gone wrong?"

She hesitated, beating about the bush.

"Not here. Wait. It's difficult to tell you all about it in the street. We'll be at your home in a minute."

In the meantime, I squeezed her arm in mine but her smile was not the charming one of all the other times. As soon as the door of the library shut behind us, I took her in my arms and kissed her. I felt as if she had been kept imprisoned far away from me for a month, that poor little Aimée with those shadows under her eyes and those pale cheeks! Had she suffered very much, then? Yet the looks she gave me struck me as embarrassed rather than anything else, and she seemed feverish rather than sad. Moreover, she returned my kisses very hurriedly—and I don't at all like being kissed in double quick time!

"Come on, tell me . . . tell me everything right from the beginning."

"But it's not a very long story. . . . In fact, nothing much happened at all. It was Mademoiselle Sergent . . . well, she wanted . . . I mean, she preferred . . . she thought these English lessons were preventing me from correcting the exercise-books and making me go to bed too late. . . ."

"Look here, for goodness' sake, don't waste time. And tell me the truth. She doesn't want you to come any more?"

I was trembling with anguish; I gripped my hands between my knees to make them keep still. Aimée fidgeted with the cover of the Grammar and began to tear off a strip where it was gummed. As she did so, she raised her eyes towards me. They had grown scared again.

"Yes, that's it. But she didn't say it the way you said it, Claudine. Listen to me a moment. . . ."

I did not listen to a word; I felt as if I were dissolving with

misery. I was sitting on a little stool on the floor, and, clasping my arms round her slim waist, I beseeched her:

"Darling, don't go away. . . . If you only knew, I'd be too utterly wretched! Oh, find some excuse, make up something, come back, don't leave me! It's sheer bliss for me, just being with you! Doesn't it give *you* any pleasure at all? Am I just like Anaïs or Marie Belhomme to you? Darling, do, *do* come back and go on giving me English lessons! I love you so much. . . . I didn't tell you . . . but now you can't help seeing I do! . . . Come back, I implore you. She can't beat you for it, that red-haired beast!"

I was burning with fever and my nerves were becoming more and more frayed at feeling that Aimée's were not vibrating in sympathy. She stroked my head as it lay on her lap and only interrupted now and then with a quavering "my little Claudine!" At last her eyes brimmed over and she began to cry as she said:

"I'm going to tell you everything. It's too wretched—you make me too unhappy! Well, last Saturday, I couldn't help noticing *She* was being much nicer to me than usual. I thought she was getting used to me and would leave the two of us in peace so I was awfully happy and pleased. And then, towards the end of the evening, when we were correcting exercise-books at the same table, I suddenly looked up and saw she was crying. And she was looking at me in such a peculiar way that I was absolutely dumbfounded. Then, all at once, she got up from her chair and went off to bed. The next day, after being awfully nice to me all day, when I was alone with her in the evening and was just going to say good night, she suddenly asked me: 'You're very fond of Claudine, aren't you? And, no doubt, she returns your fondness?' And, before I had time to answer, she fell into a chair beside me and sobbed. And then she took my hands and said all sorts of things that simply took my breath away. . . ."

"What things?"

"Well . . . she said to me: 'My dear little thing, don't you realise you're breaking my heart with your indifference? Oh, my darling girl, how could you possibly not have noticed my great affection for you? My little Aimée, I'm jealous of the tenderness

you show to that brainless Claudine who's quite definitely a little unhinged. . . . If you'd only just not hate me, oh! if you'd only love me a little, I'd be a more tender friend than you could ever imagine. . . .' And she looked into the very depths of my soul with eyes like red-hot poker."

"Didn't you answer her at all?"

"Of course not! I hadn't time to! Another thing she said was: 'Do you think they're very useful to her or very kind to me, those English lessons you give her? It tears my heart every time I see the two of you go off together! Don't go there—don't ever go there again! Claudine won't give it another thought in a week's time and I can give you more affection than she's capable of feeling!' Claudine, I assure you, I no longer had any idea what I was doing. She was mesmerising me with those crazy eyes of hers and, suddenly, the room began to go round, and my head swam; and for two or three seconds, not more, I couldn't see anything at all. I could only hear her saying over and over again, and sounding terrified 'My God! . . . My poor little girl! I've frightened her . . . she's so pale, my little Aimée, my darling!' And, immediately after that, she helped me to undress, in the most kind, affectionate way, and I slept as if I'd spent the entire day walking. . . . Claudine, my poor pet, you realise there was simply nothing I could do about it!"

I was stunned. So she had passionate friendships, that volcanic Redhead! At heart, I was not tremendously surprised; it was bound to end that way. Meanwhile, I sat there, utterly overwhelmed; faced with Aimée, this frail little creature bewitched by that Fury, I did not know what to say. She dried her eyes. It seemed to me that her distress was over with her tears.

"But you . . . don't you love her at all?"

She answered, without looking at me:

"No, of course not. But, really, she does seem to be awfully fond of me and I never suspected it."

Her answer froze me completely. After all, I'm not completely out of my mind yet and I understand what people are trying to say to me. I let go her hands which I was holding and I stood

up. Something had been broken. Since she was unwilling to admit frankly that she was no longer with me against the other, since she was hiding her deepest thoughts, I thought all was over. My hands were ice-cold and my cheeks were burning. After a painful silence, I was the first to speak:

"Dear Aimée of the lovely eyes, I implore you to come just once more to finish up the month. Do you think she will agree?"

"Oh, yes! I'll ask her."

She said it promptly and spontaneously, already sure of getting anything she wanted out of Mademoiselle Sergent now. How fast she was receding from me and how fast the other had triumphed! Cowardly little Lanthénay! She loved comfort like a warmth-starved cat and knew very well that her chief's friendship would be more profitable to her than mine! But I did not mean to tell her so or she would not come back for the last lesson and I still cherished a vague hope. . . . The hour was over and I escorted Aimée to the door. In the passage, I embraced her fiercely, with a touch of despair. Once I was alone, I was surprised not to find myself feeling quite as sad as I believed myself to be. I had expected a tremendous, absurd explosion but, no, what I felt was more like a chill that froze me. . . .

At supper, I broke in upon Papa's musings.

"Papa, you know those English lessons of mine?"

"Yes, I know. You're quite right to take them. . . ."

"Please listen. I'm not going to take any more."

"Ah, they tire you, do they?"

"Yes, they get on my nerves."

"Then you're quite right."

And his thoughts flew back to his slugs—if they had ever left them.

The night was shot through with stupid dreams. Mademoiselle Sergent, as a Fury, with snakes in her red hair, was trying to embrace Aimée Lanthénay who ran away, screaming. I tried to go to her rescue but Antonin Rabastens held me back. He was dressed all in pastel pink and he pulled me back by the arm,

saying: "Listen, do listen! Here's a lyrical ballad that I sing and I'm really enraptured with it." Then he warbled in his baritone:

"Beloved friends, when I am dead,
Plant a sad *pillow* on my grrave. . . ."

He sang it to the tune of: "Ah, how my French blood thrills with pride, to see her soldiers marching by!" An absurd night and one that did not rest me in the least.

I arrived late for school and contemplated Mademoiselle Sergent, secretly surprised to think that this audacious Redhead had had such success. She darted malicious, almost mocking looks at me, but I was so tired and dispirited that I had no heart left to answer her back.

When class was over, I saw Mademoiselle Aimée lining up the little ones in file (it was as if I had dreamt the whole of yesterday evening). I said good morning to her in passing; she looked tired, too. Mademoiselle Sergent was not there. I stopped and said:

"Are you feeling all right this morning?"

"Yes, of course, thank you. You look very dark under the eyes, Claudine."

"Maybe. Any fresh news? The scene didn't start up again? Is she still as amiable to you as ever?"

She blushed and looked embarrassed.

"Oh, yes. Nothing more's happened and she's being very nice. I . . . I think you don't know her properly . . . she's not in the least like what you imagine. . . ."

Slightly nauseated, I let her go stammering on. When she had got her sentence well and truly entangled, I interrupted her:

"Perhaps you're the one who's right. You'll come on Wednesday for the last time?"

"Oh, indeed I will. I've asked her. It's all fixed. Definitely."

How quickly things change! Since that scene yesterday evening, we had already begun to speak differently to each other. Today I did not dare to show a trace of the vociferous misery I had let her see last night. At all costs, I must make her laugh a little.

"How are your love-affairs? Is the handsome Richelieu going on all right?"

"Who do you mean? Armand Duplessis? Oh, yes, he's going on splendidly. Sometimes he stays two hours in the shadows under my window. But yesterday night, I let him know that I'd noticed him and he went striding away at a great rate, on those long legs of his—they're just like the legs of a compass. And when Monsieur Rabastens wanted to bring him along the day before yesterday, he refused to come."

"You know, Armand is seriously keen on you. I know what I'm talking about. I overheard a conversation between those two masters last Sunday. Quite by chance, by the roadside. And . . . I'll only tell you this much! . . . Armand has got it badly. Only try and tame him—he's a wild bird."

She was all animation now and wanted all the details, but I ran off.

Let me try and think about the singing-lessons we are to have from the seductive Antonin Rabastens. They're to begin on Thursday. I shall put on my blue skirt, with the pleated blouse that shows off my figure, and my apron. Not the big black apron I wear on weekdays with the close-fitting bib (though it's quite becoming), but the pretty little pale blue embroidered one I wear at home on Sundays. And that's all. I'm not going to take too much trouble for his friendship or my dear, kind little school-mates will notice.

Aimée, Aimée! It really is a pity that she's flown away so soon, that charming little bird who might have consoled me for all those geese! Now, I feel quite certain that last lesson will serve no purpose at all. With a small nature like hers, frail and egotistical, a nature that likes its pleasures but knows how to look after its interests, it is useless to struggle against Mademoiselle Sergent. I only hope that this great disappointment will not sadden me for long.

Today, at recreation, I played madly to shake myself up and to get warm. Anaïs and I, grasping Marie Belhomme firmly by

her "midwife's hands", made her run till she was breathless and panting for mercy. Afterwards, under penalty of being locked up in the lavatories, I forced her to recite Thérampène's speech on the death of Hippolyte in a loud, intelligible voice.

She declaimed Racine's alexandrines in a martyred voice and then escaped, flinging up her arms. The sisters Jaubert struck me as impressed. Good! If they don't like the classics, they'll be presented with modern verse on the next occasion.

The next occasion was not long delayed. Hardly had we got back into the classroom than we were clamped down to exercises in round and cursive handwriting in view of the approaching exams. For most of us had appalling writing.

"Claudine, you will dictate the examples while I go and find places for the younger ones' class."

She went off to the "Second Class" who, dislodged in their turn, were about to be installed goodness knows where. This promised us a good half-hour to ourselves.

I began:

"Children, today I am going to dictate to you something highly entertaining."

Chorus of "Ah!"

"Yes, some gay songs taken from *Wandering Palaces*."

"That sounds awfully nice, even from the title," observed Marie Belhomme with conviction.

"You're absolutely right. Are you ready? I'll begin."

"On the identical slow curve
Whose slowness is implacable
Ecstatically there vacillates and sinks
The complex present of slow curves"

I paused. The lanky Anaïs didn't laugh because she didn't understand. (Neither did I.) And Marie Belhomme, with her usual good faith, exclaimed: "But you know quiet well we've already done geometry this morning! And besides that all sounded too difficult. I haven't written down half what you said."

The twins rolled four defiant eyes. I went on, imperturbably:

"The selfsame autumn sees those curves homologous.
Parallel to your grief on the long autumn evenings,
Flattening the slow curve of things and your brief birdlike
hoppings."

They followed laboriously, without making any further efforts to understand. I felt a delicious satisfaction at hearing Marie Belhomme complain once more and stop me:

"Wait a bit, wait a bit . . . you're going much too fast. . . . The slow curve of what?"

I repeated: "*The slow curve of things and your brief birdlike hoppings. . . .* Now copy that out for me, first in round script, then in cursive. . . ."

These supplementary writing-lessons, designed to satisfy the examiners at the end of July, were my joy. I dictated the most extravagant things and I had immense pleasure in hearing these daughters of grocers, cobblers and policemen meekly reciting and writing down parodies of the Romantic School or of Francis Jammes' murmuring lullabies. I collected all these for the benefit of my dear little companions from the reviews and magazines my father received. And he certainly received plenty! All the periodicals from the *Revue des Deux Mondes* to the *Mercure de France* accumulated in our house. Papa confided to me the duty of cutting their pages: I allocated to myself the duty of reading them. For someone had to read them! Papa merely gave them a superficial, absent-minded glance, since the *Mercure de France* deals very seldom indeed with malacology. As for myself, I found them highly instructive, if not always comprehensible, and I used to warn Papa when the subscriptions were running out. "You must renew yours, Papa, or you'll lose the good opinion of the postman."

That gawk Anaïs, who is lacking in knowledge of literature—it's not her fault—muttered sceptically:

"These things you dictate to us at writing-lessons, I'm sure you deliberately make them up."

"What a thing to say! These are lines dedicated to our ally, the Czar Nicholas, so there!"

She could not call my bluff but her eyes remained incredulous.

Re-enter Mademoiselle Sergent who took one look at what we had written.

"Claudine!" she expostulated, "Aren't you ashamed of dictating such absurdities to them? You'd do better to learn some arithmetic theorems by heart, that would be more useful to everyone!"

But there was no conviction behind her scolding, for in her secret heart, she's rather amused by these hoaxes. All the same, I listened without a smile and my resentment returned at feeling her so near me, this woman who had forced the affections of that unreliable little Aimée. . . . Heavens! It was half-past three and in half an hour she would be coming to my home for the last time.

Mademoiselle Sergent rose from her seat and said:

"Shut your exercise-books. The big ones who are taking their Certificate, stay behind. I have something to say to you."

The others went off, deliberately dawdling over putting on their hoods and shawls. They were annoyed at not being able to stay and listen to the announcement, obviously bristling with interest, that was about to be made to us. The red-haired Headmistress addressed us and, in spite of myself, I had to admire, as always, her clear-cut voice and the decision and precision of her phrases.

"Girls, I imagine you have no illusions about your apparent inability to grasp even the rudiments of music. I make an exception of Claudine who plays the piano and reads fluently at sight. I might well let her give you lessons, but you are too lacking in discipline to obey one of your classmates. As from tomorrow, you will come on Sundays and Thursdays at nine o'clock to practise tonic sol-fa and sight-reading under the direction of Monsieur Rabastens, the assistant-headmaster, as neither Mademoiselle Lanthénay nor myself are in a position to give you lessons. Monsieur Rabastens will be assisted by Mademoiselle Claudine. Try not to behave too disgracefully. And be here at nine o'clock tomorrow."

I added ~~a~~ muttered: "Dis-miss!" that was caught by her re-

doubtable ear. She frowned, only to smile afterwards, in spite of herself. Her little speech had been delivered in such a peremptory tone that it practically called for a military salute—and she had realised it. But, to tell the truth, it looked as if I could no longer annoy her. This was discouraging. She must be very sure indeed of her triumph to display such magnanimity!

She went away and everyone began excitedly talking at once. Marie Belhomme simply could not get over it.

“Really, I say, making us have lessons with a young man! It’s a bit thick! Still, it’ll be amusing all the same. Don’t you think so, Claudine?”

“Yes. One’s got to have *some* slight distraction.”

“Won’t you be simply terrified, giving us singing-lessons with one of the masters?”

“It doesn’t mean a thing to me. I don’t care twopence either way.”

I didn’t listen much. I was waiting, with inward trepidation, wondering why Mademoiselle Aimée Lanthénay did not come at once. Anaïs was in raptures. Her face wore a sneering grin; she was clutching her ribs, as if she were convulsed with laughter, and jostling Marie Belhomme who groaned without knowing how to defend herself. “Ha, ha!” mocked Anaïs, “you’ll make a conquest of the handsome Antonin Rabastens. He won’t be able to resist them long—those long, slim hands of yours, those midwife’s hands! And your dainty waist and your eloquent eyes! Aha! my dear—this romantic story’s going to end in a marriage!” She grew wildly excited and began to dance about in front of Marie whom she had harassed into a corner and who was hiding her unlucky hands and protesting at the unseemly remarks.

Still Aimée did not come! My nerves were so much on edge that I could not keep still and went and prowled as far as the door of the staircase leading to the “temporary” (still!) rooms of the mistress. Ah! I had been right to come and look! Up there on the landing, Mademoiselle Lanthénay was all ready to set off. Mademoiselle Sergent was holding her by the waist and talking to her very low, with an air of tender insistence. Then she gave Aimée, whose veil was pulled down, a long kiss. Aimée let

herself be kissed and yielded graciously; she even stopped and turned back as she went down the stairs. I escaped without their having noticed me but, once again, I felt very unhappy. Wicked, wicked little thing to have broken away from me so quickly to bestow her caresses and her golden eyes on that woman who had been our common enemy! . . . I no longer knew what to think. . . . She joined me in the classroom where I had remained rooted to the spot in a brown study.

"Are you coming, Claudine?"

"Yes, Mademoiselle. I'm ready."

Out in the street, I no longer dared to question her—what would she reply? I preferred to wait till we got home and merely to make conventional conversation on the way. I observed that it was cold, foretold that we should have more snow and that the singing-lessons on Sundays and Thursdays would probably be amusing. . . . But I spoke without conviction and she too realised, that all this chatter meant nothing at all.

When we were settled under the lamp in the library, I opened my exercise-books and I looked at her. She was prettier than she had been the other evening; a little paler and there were shadows round her eyes that made them look larger.

"Are you tired? You look as if you were."

She was embarrassed by all my questions. Whyever should she be? She turned quite pink again and looked everywhere but at me. I was certain she felt vaguely guilty about me. I went on remorselessly:

"Tell me, is she still being so frightfully friendly towards you, the loathsome Redhead? Have the rages and the kisses of the other night started up again?"

"No, of course not. . . . She's being very kind to me. . . . I assure you she takes tremendous care of me. . . ."

"She hasn't 'mesmerised' you again?"

"Oh no, there's no question of that. . . . I think I exaggerated a little the other evening because my nerves were rather on edge."

As she said it, her face became very confused. I didn't care—

I wanted to know the truth. I went up close to her and took her hands—her tiny little hands.

“Oh darling, do tell me what else! Don’t you want to say anything more to your poor Claudine who was so wretched the day before yesterday?”

But anyone would have said that she had managed to restrain herself and had suddenly decided to say nothing. By degrees she assumed a calm little expression, artificially natural, and looked at me with those clear, untruthful cat’s eyes of hers.

“No. Look, Claudine, I assure you that she leaves me completely in peace and that she’s even gone out of her way to be very kind. You and I made her out to be much nastier than she is, you know. . . .”

What was that cold voice and those eyes that were shuttered in spite of being open to their widest extent? It was her classroom voice and that I couldn’t stand. I thrust back my desire to cry, so as not to make a fool of myself. So it was all over between us then? And if I tormented her with questions, shouldn’t we part at loggerheads? . . . I took up my English Grammar; there was nothing else to do. She opened my exercise-book with marked alacrity.

That was the first—and the only—time I took a serious lesson with her. With a heart swelling and ready to burst, I translated whole pages of:

“You have some pens but he had not a horse.”

“We should have your cousin’s apples if he had plenty of pen-knives.”

“Have you any ink in your ink-pot? No, but I have a table in my bedroom, etc., etc.”

Towards the end of the lesson, that extraordinary Aimée asked me point-blank:

“My little Claudine, you aren’t angry with me?”

I was not altogether lying when I answered:

“No. I’m not *angry* with you.”

It was almost true. I did not feel angry, only unhappy and exhausted. I escorted her to the door and I kissed her, but she

turned her head so much away as she held out her cheek that my lips almost touched her ear. The heartless little thing! I watched her go off under the lamp-post with a vague desire to run after her. But what would have been the good?

I slept pretty badly and my eyes proved it. There were shadows under them that reached to the middle of my cheeks. Luckily, that rather becomes me. I noticed this in the looking-glass as I was fiercely brushing my hair (quite golden this morning) before setting off for the singing-lesson.

I arrived half an hour too early and I couldn't help laughing when I found two out of my four classmates already installed in the school! We inspected each other closely and Anaïs gave an approving whistle at my blue dress and my charming apron. She had trotted out for the occasion the apron she wears on Thursdays and Sundays. It's red, embroidered in white and makes her look paler than ever. Her hair was done in a "helmet" with the puff in front pushed well forward, almost overhanging her forehead and she'd squeezed herself till she could hardly breathe into a new belt. Charitably, she observed out loud that I looked ill but I replied that it suited me to look tired. Marie Belhomme came running in, harum-scarum and scatter-brained as usual. She too had adorned herself, in spite of being in mourning. Her big frilly collar of ruched crêpe made her look like a bewildered black Pierrot. With her long, velvety eyes and her lost, innocent expression, she was quite charming. The two Jauberts arrived together, as always, ready to behave irreproachably and never to raise their eyes and to speak ill of all the rest of us after the lesson. We warmed ourselves, clustered round the stove, as we teased the handsome Antonin in advance. Attention! Here he was. . . . A noise of voices and laughter sounded nearer and nearer, then Mademoiselle Sergent opened the door, followed by the irresistible assistant-master.

Rabastens was a splendid sight! He wore a fur cap and a dark blue suit under his overcoat. He removed his cap and coat on entering, after a "Young ladies!" accompanied by a low bow. He had decorated his jacket with a rust-red chrysanthemum in the

best of taste and his grey-green tie, patterned with interlacing white circles, was highly impressive. He had obviously knotted it with studious care in front of the mirror. In a flash, we were all demurely lined up, our hands surreptitiously pulling down our blouses to smooth out the faintest trace of unalluring creases. Marie Belhomme was already enjoying herself so whole-heartedly that she gave a loud giggle and then stopped, frightened at her own audacity. Mademoiselle Sergent knitted her terrible eyebrows and was obviously annoyed. She had given me a look as she came in. I thought: "I bet her little friend already tells her every single thing!" I kept obstinately assuring myself that Aimée was not worth so much misery but I was not in the least convinced by my own arguments.

"Young ladies," said Rabastens in his guttural voice. "Would one of you be good enough to lend me her book?"

The lanky Anaïs hurriedly offered her copy of Marmontel's piano pieces so as to get herself noticed and was rewarded with an exaggeratedly affable "Thank you." That hulking fellow must practise his manners in front of the long mirror of his wardrobe. It is true that he doesn't possess a wardrobe with a long mirror.

"Mademoiselle Claudine," he said to me with a fascinating ogle (fascinating for him, I mean), "I am charmed and extremely honoured to become your colleague. For you give singing-lessons to these young ladies, do you not?"

"Yes, but they are not in the least obedient to one of their own classmates," Mademoiselle Sergent cut in sharply. She was becoming impatient with all this chit-chat. "With your assistance, Monsieur, she will obtain better results. Otherwise they will fail in their Certificate, for they do not seem to have grasped even the rudiments of music."

Well done! *That* would teach the gentleman to spin out meaningless phrases! My companions listened with unconcealed astonishment; no one had ever displayed such gallantry towards them before. What reduced them to stupefaction were the compliments lavished on me by the fulsome Antonin.

Mademoiselle Sergent took the "Marmontel" and indicated the

gulf his new pupils refused to cross, some from inattentiveness, some from sheer inability to understand. The one exception was Anaïs whose memory allowed her to learn all the sol-fa exercises by heart without having to beat time and without distorting them. How true it was that they "had not grasped even the rudiments of music", those little duffers! And, as they made it a kind of point of honour not to obey me, they were certainly going to be marked "zero" in the forthcoming exam. This prospect enraged Mademoiselle Sergent who could not sing in tune and so could not act as a singing-teacher, any more than could Mademoiselle Lanthénay, who had never properly recovered from a long-ago attack of laryngitis.

"Make them sing one by one to begin with," I said to the southerner (he was beaming and preening himself like a peacock at being in our midst). "They all make mistakes in time, every single one of them, but not the same mistakes. And, up to now, I haven't been able to stop them."

"Let's see, Mademoiselle . . . ?"

"Marie Belhomme."

"Mademoiselle Marie Belhomme, would you do this exercise for me in tonic sol-fa?"

It was a little polka in G, totally innocent of any nasty traps, but poor Marie, who couldn't be less musical, has never been able to sol-fa it correctly. Under this direct attack, she was seized with tremors; her face turned crimson and her eyes swam.

"I'll beat one silent bar, then you'll begin on the first beat: *Ray, te, te, lah, soh, fah, fah*. . . . Not awfully difficult, is it?"

"Yes, Sir," answered Marie who had quite lost her head from shyness.

"Good. I'll begin. . . . One, two, one . . ."

"*Ray, te, te, lah, soh, fah, fah*," twittered Marie in a voice like a hen with a sore throat.

She had not missed the opportunity of beginning on the second beat! I stopped her.

"No, do listen! One, two, *Ray, te, te* . . . have you got it? Monsieur Rabastens is beating one empty bar. Start again."

"One, two, one . . ."

"*Ray, te, te . . .*" she began again fervently, making the same mistake! To think that, for three whole months, she's been singing that polka out of time! Rabastens intervened, patient and discreet.

"Allow me, Mademoiselle Belhomme. Would you please beat time along with me."

He took her wrist and guided her hand.

"You'll understand better this way: one, two, one . . . But, come on! Sing!"

She did not begin at all, this time! Scarlet as a result of this unexpected gesture, she had completely lost countenance. I was immensely amused. But the handsome baritone, highly flattered at the poor little thing's distress (she was as fluttered as a linnet) made a point of insisting. That gawk Anaïs had her cheeks puffed out with suppressed laughter.

"Mademoiselle Anaïs, may I ask you to sing this exercise, to show Mademoiselle how it should be done?"

That one needed no pressing! She cooed her little piece "with expression", lingering on the high notes and being none too correct in her time. Still, she knew it by heart and her rather absurd way of singing a sol-fa exercise as if it were a sentimental song pleased the southerner who congratulated her. She tried to blush, couldn't manage to, and was obliged to confine herself to lowering her eyes, biting her lips and drooping her head.

I said to Rabastens:

"Sir, would you make us go through some of the two-part exercises? I've done everything I could but they still don't even begin to know them."

I was in a serious mood that morning: firstly, because I didn't feel much like laughing; secondly, because, if I played the fool too much during this first lesson, Mademoiselle Sergent would stop the others. Moreover, I was thinking of Aimée. Wasn't she going to come downstairs this morning? Only a week ago, she'd never have dared lie in bed so late!

With my mind on all this, I gave out the parts; the firsts to Anaïs, reinforced by Marie Belhomme; the seconds to the two new boarders. As for myself, I would come to the rescue of

whichever turned out to be the weaker. Rabastens supported the seconds.

Then we executed the little duet, I standing by the handsome Antonin who trolled out "Ah! Ahs!" full of expression in his baritone as he leant over in my direction. We must have made an extraordinarily funny group. That incorrigible southerner was so preoccupied in displaying his charms that he made mistake after mistake, without anyone noticing it, of course. The stylish chrysanthemum he wore in his buttonhole fell out and dropped on the floor. When he had sung his piece, he picked it up and threw it on the table, saying, as if he were appealing for personal compliments: "Well, I think that didn't go too badly, do you?"

Mademoiselle Sergent damped his enthusiasm by replying:

"Yes, but let them sing by themselves without you or Claudine. Then you'll see."

(I could have sworn, from his discomfited looks, that he had forgotten what he was here for. He's going to be a first-class teacher, that Rabastens! So much the better! When the Headmistress doesn't come to the lessons, we'll be able to do exactly what we like with him.)

"Yes, I'm sure, Mademoiselle. But if these young ladies will take a little trouble, I'm sure they'll soon come to know enough to satisfy the examiners. The standard in music is very low indeed, as you must be the first to realise."

Well, well, so he was getting his own back now, was he? He couldn't have found a better way of bringing home to the Red-head that she was incapable of singing a scale. She understood the spite behind the remark and averted her sombre eyes. Antonin went up a little in my esteem, but he had antagonised Mademoiselle Sergent who said sharply:

"I wonder if you would be good enough to make these children practise some more? I should rather like them to sing one by one so as to acquire a little self-possession and confidence."

It was the turn of the twins who possessed non-existent, uncertain voices without much sense of rhythm, but those two

plodders always get by, they work with such exemplary diligence! I can't stand those Jauberts, so virtuous and so modest. And I could just see them working at home, going over each exercise fifty times, before coming to the Thursday lessons, the irreproachable sneaks.

To end up with, Rabastens "gave himself the pleasure," as he said, of hearing me sing. He asked me to read the most boring things at sight, ghastly sentimental songs and airs adorned with gargling runs and trills whose out-of-date *coloratura* seemed to him the last word in art. From vanity, because Mademoiselle Sergent was there, and Anaïs too, I sang my best. And the unspeakable Antonin went into ecstasies; he got himself completely tied up in tortuous compliments, in labyrinthine sentences from which I deliberately did not try to extricate him. I was enjoying myself too much listening to him with my eyes riveted on his with earnest attention. I don't know how he would have got to the end of a sentence crammed full of parentheses if Mademoiselle Sergent had not come up to us and asked:

"Have you given these girls some pieces to study for homework during the week?"

"No," he had given them nothing at all. He could not get it into his head that he had not been summoned here to sing duets with me!

But whatever had become of little Aimée? I simply had to know. So I deftly overturned an inkpot, taking care to get plenty of ink on my fingers. Then I let out an "Oh!" of desolation, spreading out all my fingers like spiders. Mademoiselle Sergent took the time to remark that this was typical of me and sent me off to wash my hands under the pump.

Once outside, I wiped my fingers with the blackboard sponge to take off the worst of it, then I searched about, peering into every corner. Nothing in the house. I went outside again and walked as far as the little wall that separated us from the Headmaster's garden. Still nothing. But no! There were people talking on the other side. Who? I leant over the little wall to look down into the garden which is a yard or two lower than our playground and there, under the leafless hazels, in the pallid

sunshine, so faint you could hardly feel it, I saw the sombre Riche-lieu talking to Mademoiselle Aimée Lanthénay. Two or three days ago I'd have stood on my head and waved my feet in astonishment at this spectacle, but my recent great betrayal had slightly inured me to shocks.

That shy, unsociable Duplessis! At the moment, he had found his tongue and no longer kept his eyes lowered. Had he burnt his boats then?

"Tell me, Mademoiselle, didn't you suspect? Oh, do say you did!"

Aimée, her face quite pink, was quivering with joy. Her eyes were more golden than ever and they kept alertly watching and listening all about her as he spoke. She gave a charming laugh to indicate that she hadn't suspected anything at all, the liar!

"Come, you must have suspected when I used to spend my evening under your windows. But I love you with all my might . . . not just to flirt for a term and then go off on my holidays and forget you. Will you listen to me seriously, as I am speaking to you now?"

"Is it as serious as all that?"

"Yes, I assure you it is. Will you authorise me to come and talk to you tonight in the presence of Mademoiselle?"

Oh, bother! I heard the door of the classroom opening: they were coming to see what had become of me. In two bounds I was far from the wall and almost beside the pump. I flung myself on my knees on the ground and when the Headmistress, accompanied by Rabastens, came up to me, she found me energetically rubbing the ink on my hands with sand, "because water won't take it off".

This was a great success.

"Leave off doing that," said Mademoiselle Sergent, "you can take it off at home with pumice-stone."

The handsome Antonin addressed a "Good-bye" to me that was both gay and melancholy. I had stood up and I gave him my most undulating toss of the head which makes my curls ripple softly all down my cheeks. Behind his back, I laughed: the great hobbledehoy, he thought he had completed my conquest! I

returned to the classroom to fetch my hood and I walked home brooding over the conversation I had overheard behind the little wall.

What a pity I hadn't been able to hear the end of their amorous dialogue! Aimée would have consented, without being pressed, to accept the attentions of this inflammable but honest Richelieu and he was quite capable of asking her to marry him. What is it that makes people so infatuated with this little woman who, strictly speaking, isn't even pretty. She's fresh, it's true, and she has magnificent eyes; but, after all, there are plenty of beautiful eyes in really pretty faces, yet all the men stare at her! The builders stop mixing their mortar when she passes by, winking at each other and clicking their tongues. (Yesterday, I heard one of them say to his mate as he pointed her out: "Strewth, I wouldn't half like to be a flea in her bed!") The boys in the streets put on swank for her and the old gentlemen who frequent the Café de la Perle and take their Vermouths there every evening discuss with interest "that little girl who teaches at the school, who makes your mouth water like a fruit tart that isn't sugared enough". Builders, retired businessmen, headmistress, schoolmaster, why do they all fall for her? As for myself, I'm not quite so interested in her since I've discovered what a traitress she is. And I feel quite empty; empty of my tenderness; empty of my fierce misery of that first evening.

They've been pulling it down fast and now they've nearly pulled it down altogether, poor old school! When they were demolishing the ground floor, we watched, with great curiosity, the discovery of some double walls. We had always thought those walls thick and solid; now they turned out to be as hollow as cupboards with a kind of black passage between them where there was nothing but dust and an appalling, ancient, repulsive stench. I took much pleasure in frightening Marie Belhomme by telling her that these hiding-places had been built in the old days for the walling-up of women who were unfaithful to their husbands and that I'd seen white bones lying among the rubble. She looked at me with wide, scared eyes and asked: "Is it really

true?" Then she hurried to the walls to "see the bones". The next minute, she was back at my side.

"I didn't see a thing. It's just another of your fibs you're telling me!"

"May I lose the use of my tongue this instant if those hiding-places in the walls weren't hollowed out for a criminal end! And, besides, you're a nice one to tell me I'm fibbing, considering you've got a chrysanthemum hidden in your Marmontel—the one Monsieur Antonin Rabastens was wearing in his button-hole!"

I shouted this at the top of my voice because I had just caught sight of Mademoiselle Sergent coming into the playground, with Dutertre in her wake. Oh! we see *him* often enough, to do him justice! And what noble devotion to duty that doctor must have to be incessantly leaving his clinic to come and ascertain whether the state of our school is satisfactory! That school is dispersing, bit by bit at the moment; the first class to the Infants' School, the second over there to the Town Hall. No doubt he fears that our education may be suffering from these successive displacements, the worthy District Superintendent!

They had heard, the two of them, what I had just said—naturally, I'd done it on purpose!—and Dutertre seized the opportunity to come over to us. Marie wanted to sink into the ground. She moaned and hid her face in her hands. But he was decent enough to be all smiles as he approached. He slapped the silly noodle on the shoulder and she trembled with alarm:

"Little one, what's that devilish Claudine saying to you? Do you preserve the flowers our handsome assistant wears? Mademoiselle Sergent, your pupils' hearts are thoroughly awakened, you know! Marie, do you want me to tell your mother so as to make her realise that her daughter's no longer a child?"

Poor Marie Belhomme! Quite incapable of answering one word, she stared at Dutertre, she stared at me, she stared at the Headmistress, with eyes like a startled fawn and was on the verge of tears. . . . Mademoiselle Sergent, who was not entirely delighted at the opportunity the District Inspector had found of

gossiping with us, watched him with jealous and admiring eyes. She did not dare carry him off. (I knew him well enough to guess he might easily refuse to go.) As for me, I was rejoicing in Marie's confusion, in Mademoiselle Sergent's impatient displeasure (so her little Aimée wasn't enough for her any more, then?) and also at the sight of our good doctor's obvious pleasure at staying beside us. Apparently my eyes must have expressed my mingled feelings of rage and satisfaction for he laughed, showing his pointed teeth.

"Claudine, what's making your eyes sparkle like that? Is it devilment?"

I answered "Yes" with my head, merely tossing my hair without speaking, an irreverence that drew Mademoiselle Sergent's bushy eyebrows together in a frown. . . . I didn't care. She couldn't have everything, that nasty Redhead; her District Superintendent and her little assistant. No, definitely not. . . . More offhandedly than ever, Dutertre came close to me and slipped his arm round my shoulders. The lanky Anaïs watched us with curiosity, screwing up her eyes.

"Are you feeling well?"

"Yes, Doctor, thank you very much."

"Be serious." (As if *he* were being serious!) "Why have you always got those dark shadows under your eyes?"

"Because the good Lord made them like that."

"You oughtn't to read so much. I bet you read in bed?"

"A little, not much. Mustn't one?"

"We-ell. . . . All right, you can read. What *do* you read? Come on, tell me."

He was getting excited and he gripped my shoulders with a brusque gesture. But I'm not so stupid as I was the other day and I didn't blush—at least, not yet. The Headmistress had decided to go and scold the little ones who were playing with the pump and drenching themselves. How she must be boiling inwardly! My heart danced at the thought!

"Yesterday, I finished *Aphrodite*. Tonight I shall begin *La Femme et le Pantin*."

"Indeed? You *are* going the pace! Pierre Louÿs? The deuce! Not surprising that you . . . I should very much like to know how much you understand of all that. Everything?"

(I don't think I'm a coward, but I shouldn't have liked to continue this conversation alone with him in a wood or on a sofa; his eyes glittered so! Besides, he obviously imagined I was about to confide smutty secrets to him. . . .)

"No, I don't understand it all, unfortunately. But quite a lot of things, all the same. Then I've also read, last week, *Susanne* by Léon Daudet. And I'm just finishing *L'Année de Clarisse*. It's one of Paul Adam's and I simply adore it!"

"Yes, yes. And do you get to sleep afterwards? . . . But you'll tire yourself, if you go on like that. Take a little care of yourself, it would be a pity to wear yourself out, you know."

What was he really thinking? He looked at me from so close to, with such a visible desire to caress me—to kiss me—that, suddenly, a shameful burning flush covered my face like rouge and I lost my self-assurance. Perhaps *he* was frightened too—of losing his self-possession—for he let me go, breathing hard. He left me after giving my hair a stroke right down from my head to the tip of my longest curls, as if he were stroking the back of a cat. Mademoiselle Sergent came up to us again, her hands shaking with jealousy, and the two of them went off together. I saw them talking very fast to each other: she seemed to be anxiously imploring him while he lightly shrugged his shoulders and laughed.

They ran into Mademoiselle Aimée and Dutertre stopped, lured by her seductive eyes, and joked with her familiarly. She looked flushed, and a little embarrassed, but pleased. This time Mademoiselle Sergent displayed no jealousy; on the contrary. . . . Whereas my heart always jumps a trifle when that little creature appears. Ah! How badly that's all turned out!

I buried myself so deep in my thoughts that I didn't notice that gawk Anaïs executing a war-dance round me.

"Will you leave me in peace, you filthy monster! I don't feel like playing today."

"Oh yes, *I* know! You've got the District Superintendent on

your mind. . . . My goodness me, you don't know which one to listen to these days—Rabastens, Dutertre, who else? Have you made your choice? And what about Mademoiselle Lanthénay?"

She whirled round me, her eyes diabolical in a face that was motionless but secretly furious. For the sake of getting some peace, I flung myself on her and pounded her arms with my fists: she yelled at once, like a coward, and made her escape. I pursued her and hemmed her in in the corner by the pump where I poured some water on her head, not much, just the dregs of the communal drinking-cup. She lost her temper completely.

"You know, that's idiotic. That's not the thing to do. I happen to have a cold. You're making me cough!"

"Cough away! Doctor Dutertre will give you a free consultation . . . and throw in a little something extra!"

The arrival of the lovelorn Duplessis interrupted our quarrel. He was transfigured, since two days ago, that Armand! His radiant eyes proclaimed that Aimée had granted him her hand, along with her heart and her faith, all tied up in one parcel! But when he observed his sweet fiancée joking and laughing over there between Dutertre and the Headmistress, with the Superintendent teasing her and Mademoiselle Sergent encouraging her, his eyes clouded. Aha! So I wasn't the only one who was jealous! I really believe he would have turned round and gone away if the Redhead herself hadn't called out to him. He ran up to them with great strides and bowed low to Dutertre who shook his hand familiarly, as if congratulating him. The pale Armand blushed, became radiant once more and looked at his little fiancée with tender pride. Poor Richelieu, I feel distressed about him! I don't know why, but I've an idea that this Aimée, who half-pretends to be unconscious and who commits herself so hastily, will bring him no happiness. Anaïs was so busy watching the group, determined not to miss a single gesture, that she forgot all about abusing me.

"I say," she whispered to me very low, "what are they doing all together like that? Whatever's up?"

I blurted out:

"What's up is that Monsieur Armand—the compass—Riche-

lieu—has gone and asked for Mademoiselle Lanthénay's hand and she's bestowed it on him and they're engaged! And, at this particular moment, Dutertre is congratulating them. *That's what's up!*"

"Ah! . . . Is that really true? You mean, he's asked for her hand, *to get married?*"

I couldn't help laughing; she had let the word out so naturally, with a guilelessness that was quite unlike her! But I did not let her vegetate in her innocent surprise.

"Run—run and fetch something—it doesn't matter what—from the classroom and listen to what they say. If I go, they'll be suspicious at once!"

She dashed off. As she passed the group, she adroitly lost her wooden sabot (we all wore sabots in the winter) and kept her ears stretched as she put it on again, taking as long as possible. Then she vanished and reappeared, ostentatiously carrying her mittens which she slipped on her hands as she returned to me.

"What did you overhear?"

"Monsieur Dutertre was saying to Armand Duplessis: 'I am not going to wish you good luck, Monsieur. That would be superfluous when you're marrying such a girl as this.' And Mademoiselle Aimée Lanthénay lowered her eyes—like this. But, honestly, I'd never have believed it was all fixed up—as definite as all that!"

I was astonished too, but for a different reason! Aimée was going to get married and this no longer produced any effect on Mademoiselle Sergent? There must certainly be something behind all this that I knew nothing about! Why should she have gone to such lengths to conquer Aimée, why made those tearful scenes, only to hand her over now, with no further regrets, to this Armand Duplessis whom she hardly knew? The devil take them both! Now, once again, I'd got to wear myself to a frazzle to discover what was at the bottom of all this. After all, it may well be that she's only jealous of women.

To clear my mind, I organised a big game of "he" with my classmates and the "country bumpkins" of the second division who were becoming sufficiently grown-up to be allowed to play

with us. I drew two lines about three yards apart, stationed myself in the middle as "he" and the game began, punctuated by shrill cries and by a certain number of falls for which I was responsible.

The bell rang and we went in for the deadly boring needlework lesson. I took up my tapestry with disgust. After ten minutes, Mademoiselle Sergent left us, on the pretext of having to give out some material to the "little class" which, homeless once again, was temporarily (of course!) installed in an empty room near us in the Infants' School. I was quite ready to bet that, in point of fact, the Redhead was going to spend more time on her little Aimée than on handing out supplies.

After I'd done about twenty stitches in my tapestry, I was seized with a sudden access of stupidity which prevented me from knowing whether I should change the shade to fill in an oak-leaf or whether I should keep the same wool with which I had just finished a willow leaf. So I went out, work in hand, to ask advice from the omniscient Headmistress. I crossed the corridor and went into the little classroom. The fifty small girls shut up in there were squealing, pulling each other's hair, laughing, dancing about and drawing funny men on the blackboard. And not a sign of Mademoiselle Sergent, not a sign of Mademoiselle Lanthénay! This was becoming very queer! I went out again and pushed open the door of the staircase: no one on the stairs! Suppose I went up? Yes, but whatever should I say if I were found there? Pooh! I would say that I was coming to look for Mademoiselle Sergent because I'd heard her old peasant of a mother calling her.

Ssh! I went upstairs in my gym shoes, very quietly, leaving my sabots below. Nothing at the top of the stairs. But the door of one room stood slightly ajar and, promptly, my one thought was to look through the opening. Mademoiselle Sergent, sitting in her big armchair, luckily had her back to me. She was holding her assistant on her lap, like a baby. Aimée was sighing softly and fervently kissing the Redhead who was clasping her tight. Well done! No one could say this Headmistress bullied her subordinates! I could not see their faces because the back of the chair

was too high, but I didn't need to see them. My heart pounded in my ears and, suddenly, I dashed down the staircase on my silent rubber soles.

Three seconds later, I was back in my place next to the lanky Anaïs who was busy reading the *Supplément* and looking at the picture with much delectation. So that she shouldn't notice I was upset, I asked to look too, as if I were really interested! There was a seductive story by Catulle Mendès which I should have enjoyed, but my mind was not much on what I was reading; it was still far too full of what I had spied on up there! I had got more than I asked for and I certainly had not believed their caresses were as ardent as that. . . .

Anaïs showed me a drawing by Gil Baër of a slim young man, without a moustache, who looked like a woman in disguise. Carried away by reading the *Carnet de Lyonnnette* and some amorous pieces by Armand Sylvestre, she said, with troubled eyes: "I've got a cousin who looks like that. His name's Raoul. He's at college and I go and see him in the holidays every summer." This revelation explained her relatively virtuous behaviour recently; she hardly ever wrote to boys nowadays. The sisters Jaubert were putting on a great show of being scandalised on account of this naughty magazine while Marie Belhomme overturned her ink-pot to come and have a look. When she had looked at the pictures and read a little, she fled, flinging up her long hands and crying: "It's disgusting! I don't want to read the rest before recreation!" She had hardly sat down again and begun to mop up her spilt ink than Mademoiselle Sergent returned, grave but with rapt, sparkling eyes. I stared at that Red-head as if I were not sure she was the same person I had seen kissing upstairs.

"Marie, you will write me a composition on the subject of clumsiness and bring it to me at five o'clock this afternoon. Girls, tomorrow a new assistant-mistress, Mademoiselle Griset, will be arriving. You won't have anything to do with her; she will only be taking the lower class."

I was on the point of asking: "And Mademoiselle Aimée—is she leaving then?" But the answer came of its own accord.

"Mademoiselle Lanthénay is wasting her intelligence in the second class. Henceforward, she will give you history lessons, also drawing and needlework, in here, under my supervision."

I looked at her and smiled, nodding my head as if to congratulate her on this decidedly satisfactory arrangement. This roused her temper at once and she said, frowning: "Claudine, how much have you done to your tapestry? All that? You certainly haven't exhausted yourself!"

I put on my most idiotic expression as I replied:

"But, Mademoiselle, I went to the second class just now to ask if I was to use Number 2 green for the oak-leaf and there wasn't anyone there. I called up the staircase to you but there wasn't anyone there either."

I spoke slowly and loudly, so that all the noses bent over the knitting and the sewing were raised inquisitively. Everyone was listening avidly; the bigger girls were wondering what the Headmistress could be doing so far away, abandoning the pupils to their own devices. Mademoiselle Sergent turned a darker crimson still and answered hastily: "I had gone to see where it would be possible to put the new assistant. The school building is nearly finished—they're drying it out with big fires—and no doubt we shall soon be able to move into it."

I made a gesture of protest and apology which meant:

"Oh! It's not for me to know where you were . . . you could only be where your duty called you." But I felt a savage satisfaction at the thought that I could have replied: "No, zealous teacher, you couldn't care less about the new assistant. It's the other one, Mademoiselle Lanthénay, who takes up all your thoughts, and you were up in your room with her, kissing her full on the mouth."

While I was hatching rebellious thoughts, the Redhead had regained her self-control. Exceedingly calm now, she addressed the class in a precise voice. . . .

"Take your exercise-books. The ones marked: *French Composition*. Explain and comment on the following thought: 'Time does not respect what has been done without him.' You have one hour and a half."

Oh, anguish and despair! What ineptitudes have got to be trotted out again now? I don't care a button whether time respects what is done without inviting him or not! Always subjects like that, or worse! Yes, worse—because it's almost New Year's Eve and we shan't escape the usual little set-piece about New Year gifts: venerable custom of giving and receiving (*mem: i before e except after c*) same; joy of children, tender emotion of parents; sweets, toys, etc.;—not forgetting the touching note on the little poor children who don't get any presents and whom we must help on this day so that they may have their share of joy!—Horror, horror!

While I inwardly raged, the others were already scribbling their "roughs". That gawk Anaïs was waiting for me to begin so that she could model her opening on mine and Marie Belhomme had already filled a page with ineptitudes—sentences that contradicted one another and reflections quite beside the point. After yawning for a quarter of an hour, I made up my mind and wrote straight into my "Fair-Copy" book without doing a rough, much to the indignation of the others.

At four o'clock, as we came out of school, I realised, without regret, that it was my turn to sweep up with Anaïs. Normally this chore revolts me but today I didn't care. Actually, I would rather do it than not. As I was going off to fetch the watering-can, I ran at last into Mademoiselle Aimée. Her cheeks were flushed and her eyes shining.

"Good afternoon, Mademoiselle. When's the wedding?"

"What! But . . . these children always know everything! But it's not decided yet . . . at least, the date isn't. It'll be in the long vacation, probably. . . . Tell me, you don't think he's ugly, Monsieur Duplessis?"

"Ugly—Richelieu ugly? No, of course not. He's much better than the other one, ever so much better! Do you love him?"

"But, naturally I do, since I'm taking him for my husband!"

"As if that were a reason! Don't give me silly answers like that—do you think you're talking to Marie Belhomme? You don't love him in the least—you think he's nice and you want

to get married to see what it's like. And out of vanity, too, to annoy your friends at the Training College who'll stay old maids. That's all there is to it! Don't play too many tricks on him, that's the best I can wish him, because he certainly deserves to be loved better than you'll ever love him."

It came out slap! And I promptly turned on my heels and ran off to fetch water to sprinkle the floor. She stayed there rooted to the spot, abashed. At last she went off to supervise the sweeping of the junior classroom or to tell her dear Mademoiselle Sergent what I had just said. Let her go! I didn't want to bother any more about those two crazy women, one of whom wasn't crazy at all. I was so excited that I sprinkled recklessly; I even sprinkled Anaïs's feet and the geography maps, then I swept till my arms ached. It was a relief to tire myself out like that.

Singing-lesson. Enter Antonin Rabastens wearing a sky-blue tie. "Hail, fair sun!" as the Provençal girls used to say to Roumestan. Goodness, Mademoiselle Aimée Lanthénay was there too, followed by a little creature even smaller than herself, who moved with unusual suppleness and seemed to be about thirteen. She had a rather flat face, green eyes, a fresh complexion and silky, dark hair. This little girl suddenly stopped in the doorway, overcome with shyness. Mademoiselle Aimée turned towards her, laughing: "Now then, come along, don't be frightened: Luce, do you hear?"

So it was her sister! I had completely forgotten this detail. She had talked to me about this sister, who would probably be coming to school, in the days when we were friends. . . . It struck me as so funny, her bringing along this little sister, that I pinched Anaïs, who clucked, and I tickled Marie Belhomme who miaowed and I executed a silent two-step behind Mademoiselle Sergent's back. Rabastens found these pranks charming and little sister Luce stared at me with her slit-like eyes. Mademoiselle Aimée began to laugh (she laughs at everything these days, she's so happy!) and said to me:

"Now *please*, Claudine, don't frighten her out of her wits as a start. She's shy enough by nature as it is."

"Mademoiselle, I will protect her like my own personal virtue. How old is she?"

"She was fifteen last month."

"Fifteen? Well, after that, I'll never trust anyone again! I thought she was a good thirteen."

The little thing, who had turned quite red, looked down at her feet—they were pretty, too. She nestled against her sister and clutched her arm for reassurance. Aha! I'd give her courage!

"Come along, little girl, come over here to me. Don't be afraid. This gentleman, who displays such intoxicating ties in our honour, is our good singing-master. You'll only see him on Thursdays and Sundays, unfortunately. Those big girls there are some of your classmates—you'll soon get to know them. As for me, I'm the model pupil, the rarest of all birds. I never get scolded ('strue, isn't it, Mademoiselle?) and I'm always good, like I am today. I'll be a second mother to you!"

Mademoiselle Sergent was amused though she tried not to show it; Rabastens was admiring, and the eyes of the new girl expressed doubts of my sanity. But I let her alone; I'd had all the fun I wanted with that Luce. She stayed close to her sister who called her "little silly" and I had lost interest in her. I asked right out, making no bones about it:

"Where are you going to put this child to sleep, as nothing's finished yet?"

"With me," replied Aimée.

I pinched my lips, I looked the Headmistress straight in the face and I said, very distinctly:

"Frightful bore for you, that!"

Rabastens laughed behind his hand (did he know something?) and emitted the opinion that perhaps we might begin to sing. Yes, we might; and we actually did sing. The little new girl dissociated herself completely and remained obstinately mute.

"You don't know this music well, Mademoiselle Lanthénay Junior?" inquired the exquisite Antonin, smiling like a commercial traveller.

"I know it a little, Sir," answered little Luce in a faint, lilting

voice that must have been pleasant to hear when it was not strangled with terror.

"Very well, then?"

Very well then, nothing. Why couldn't he leave the child in peace, that dandy of the Canebière?

At that very moment, Rabastens whispered to me: "Anyway, if these young ladies are tired, I think the singing-lessons are a waste of time!"

I glanced all round me, startled at his audacity in speaking to me under his breath. But he was right; my companions were occupied with the new girl, coaxing her and speaking gently to her and she was answering happily, quite reassured by finding herself kindly received. As to that cat Lanthénay and her beloved tyrant, huddled together in the embrasure of the window that looked on to the garden, they had completely forgotten us. Mademoiselle Sergent had put her arm round Aimée's waist; they were talking very low—or not talking at all, which came to the same thing. Antonin, whose gaze had followed mine, could not stop himself from laughing.

"They get on tremendously well together!"

"They certainly do. It's touching, this friendship, isn't it, Sir?"

The big simpleton did not know how to hide his feelings and blurted out, very low:

"Touching? I'd call it embarrassing for the others! Sunday night, I went to take back the music books and those ladies were here in the classroom, with no light on. I came in—after all it's a public place, this classroom—and, in the dusk, I caught sight of Mademoiselle Sergent and Mademoiselle Aimée, close together kissing like hot cakes. Do you imagine they moved apart? Not a bit of it! Mademoiselle Sergent just turned round and languidly asked: 'Who's there?' Well, I'm hardly what you'd call shy, but all the same, I just stood there, looking at them like a dumb ox."

(Let him talk as much as he liked, our candid assistant-master; I had nothing to learn from *him*! But I was forgetting the most important thing.)

"What about your colleague, Sir? I imagine he's awfully happy now he's engaged to Mademoiselle Lanthénay?"

"Yes, poor boy. But, to my mind, it's nothing to be so happy about."

"Oh? Why ever not?"

"Hmm. The Headmistress does anything she likes with Mademoiselle Aimée—not very pleasant for a future husband. I'd be annoyed if my wife were dominated like that by someone other than myself."

I privately agreed with him. But the others had finished interviewing the newcomer and it was prudent for us to stop talking. Back to singing then, but no . . . it was no good. Who should dare to enter at that moment but Armand, disturbing the tender whispering of the two women? He stood enraptured beside Aimée who flirted with him, fluttering her eyelids with their curling lashes, while Mademoiselle Sergent watched them with the tender eyes of a mother-in-law who has married off her daughter. My classmates resumed their conversations and carried them on till the clock struck the hour. Rabastens was right. What queerr, sorry, what queer singing-lessons!

This morning, on coming to school, I saw a pale young girl standing in the entrance. She had dull hair, grey eyes and a skin with no bloom on it, and she was hugging a woolen shawl over her shoulders with the heart-rending air of a thin, cold, frightened cat. Anaïs pointed her out to me with a thrust of her chin, making a grimace of displeasure. I shook my head pityingly and said to her, very low: "*There's* someone who's going to be unhappy here, you can see that at a glance. The two others get on too well together not to make her life a misery."

Little by little, the other pupils arrived. Before going inside, I observed that the two school buildings were being finished at a prodigious pace; apparently Dutertre had promised a large bonus to the contractor if everything was ready on the date he had fixed. He must do a good deal of underhand jobbery, that creature!

Drawing lesson, under the direction of Mademoiselle Aimée Lanthénay. "Reproduction in line of any everyday object." This

time it was a cut-glass decanter, placed on Mademoiselle's desk, that we had to draw. These drawing lessons were invariably gay, since they furnished a thousand pretexts for getting up: one discovered "impossibilities"; one made blots of Indian ink wherever they were least desirable. Promptly, the usual storm of complaints broke out. I opened the attack:

"Mademoiselle Aimée, I *can't* draw the decanter from where I am—the stove-pipe hides it!"

Mademoiselle Aimée, deeply occupied in tickling the red hair on the nape of the Headmistress's neck (the latter was writing a letter), turned towards me.

"Bend your head forward. You can see it then, I think."

"Mademoiselle," took up Anaïs, "I *can't* see the model *at all*, because Claudine's head gets in the way!"

"Oh, how irritating you are! Turn your table round a little, then you can both see."

It was Marie Belhomme's turn now. She moaned:

"Mademoiselle, I haven't any more charcoal. And the sheet of paper you've given me has got a tear in the middle and so I *can't* draw the decanter."

"Oh!" grated Mademoiselle Sergent, exasperated. "Have you finished bothering us, all of you? Here's a sheet of paper, here's some charcoal and now, don't let me hear one more word from any of you or I'll make you draw an entire dinner-service!"

There was a terrified silence. You could have heard a fly breathe . . . for five whole minutes. At the sixth minute, a faint buzzing began again; someone dropped a sabot; Marie Belhomme coughed; I got up to go and measure the height and breadth of the decanter with outstretched arm. The lanky Anaïs did the same, as soon as I had finished, and took advantage of the fact that one had to shut one eye to crumple her face into frightful grimaces that made Marie laugh. I finished sketching the decanter in charcoal and I got up to go and fetch the Indian ink from the cupboard behind the desk where the two mistresses sat. They had forgotten us; they were talking to each other in low voices and laughing. Now and then Mademoiselle Aimée drew back with a shocked little grimace which became her very

prettily. In fact, they were now so little inhibited by our presence that it wasn't worth restraining ourselves either. Very well, now was our chance!

I shot out an inviting "Psst!" that brought all the heads up, and, indicating the loving Sergeant-Lanthenay couple to the class, I stretched out my hands in benediction over their two heads, from behind. Marie Belhomme burst out laughing with delight, the Jauberts lowered reproving noses, and, without having been seen by the interested parties, I buried myself once more in the cupboard, took out the Indian ink and brought it back to my place.

In passing, I looked at Anaïs's drawing. Her decanter resembled herself; it was too tall and had too long and thin a neck. I wanted to warn her of this but she didn't hear me; she was too absorbed in preparing some "goonygoonya" in her lap to send to the new arrival in a pencil-box, the great pest! (Goonygoonya is charcoal pounded into Indian ink so as to make an almost dry mortar that stains unwary fingers deeply, likewise frocks and exercise-books.) That poor little Luce was going to blacken her hands and dirty her drawing, when she opened the box, and would get scolded. To avenge her, I snatched Anaïs's drawing and drew, in ink, a belt, with a buckle, encircling the waist of the decanter. Underneath, I wrote: *Portrait of the Lanky Anaïs*. She raised her head at the very moment I finished writing and pushed her box of goonygoonya over to Luce with a gracious smile. The little thing turned red and thanked her. Anaïs bent once more over her drawing and let out a resounding "Oh!" of indignation which recalled our cooing teachers to reality.

"What's all this? Anaïs, you've gone mad, I presume?"

"Mademoiselle, look what Claudine's done on my drawing!"

Swelling with rage, she took it up to the desk and laid it down. Mademoiselle Sergeant cast a stern eye over it, then, suddenly, burst out laughing. Rage and despair on the part of Anaïs who would have wept with spleen if tears didn't come so hard to her. Resuming her gravity, the Headmistress declared: "This kind of joke isn't going to help you to get satisfactory marks in

your exam, Claudine. But you've made quite an accurate criticism of Anaïs's drawing for it was indeed too tall and too narrow." The great weedy thing returned to her place, frustrated and embittered. I told her:

"That'll teach you to send goonygoonya to that child who hasn't done a thing to you!"

"Oho! So you want the little one to make up for your lack of success with her elder sister—that's why you defend her with so much ardour!"

Wham!

That was a tremendous slap which resounded on her cheek. I'd aimed it with all my might, adding a "Mind your own business" for good measure. The class, completely out of hand, buzzed like a bee-hive; Mademoiselle Sergent descended from her desk for so serious an affair. It was so long since I had hit one of my companions that people were beginning to believe I had become rational. (In the old days, I had the annoying habit of settling my quarrels on my own, with kicks and blows, without thinking it necessary to tell tales like the others.) My last battle dated back more than a year.

Anaïs was crying over the table.

"Mademoiselle Claudine," said the Headmistress severely, "I insist on your controlling yourself. If you are going to start hitting your companions again, I see myself being forced to refuse to admit you any longer to the school."

But her words fell flat: my blood was up. I smiled at her so insolently that she promptly lost her temper.

"Claudine, lower your eyes!"

I did not lower a thing.

"Claudine, leave the room!"

"With pleasure, Mademoiselle!"

I left the room but, outside, I realised that I was bareheaded. I went back at once to collect my hat. The class was dismayed and silent. I noticed that Aimée had gone up close to Mademoiselle Sergent and was talking to her in a rapid, very low voice. I had not reached the doorway before the Headmistress called me back:

"Claudine, come here. Go and sit down in your place. I do not want to expel you, since you'll be leaving the class after the Certificate. . . . And, after all, you are not a mediocre pupil, though you are often a bad pupil, and I have no wish to deprive myself of you except as a last resort. Put your hat back in its place."

What that must have cost her! She was still so shaken that her heartbeats made the pages of the exercise-book she was holding flutter. I said: "Thank you, Mademoiselle," very modestly. Then, seated once more in my place beside the tall Anaïs, who was silent and a little frightened by the scene she had provoked, I thought with astonishment about the possible reasons which could have decided this vindictive Redhead to recall me. Had she been afraid of the effect it might produce in the principal town of the district? Had she thought I should chatter at the top of my voice, that I should tell everything I knew (at least), all the irregularity in this school, the pawing of the big girls by the District Superintendent and his prolonged visits to our teachers? What about the way those two ladies frequently abandoned their classes in order to exchange endearments behind closed doors? What about Mademoiselle Sergent's decidedly broad taste in reading (*Journal Amusant*, unsavoury Zolas and worse still) and the handsome, gallant assistant-master with the sentimental baritone who flirted with the girls who were taking their Certificate? Wasn't there a whole heap of suspicious things the parents did not know about because the big ones who found the School amusing never told them and the little ones hadn't got their eyes open? Had she dreaded a semi-scandal which would gravely endanger her reputation and the future of the handsome School which was being built at considerable expense? I believe so. And moreover, now that my temper had cooled, like her own, I preferred to remain in this hole where I had more fun than anywhere else. Feeling quite good again, I looked at Anaïs's mottled cheek and whispered to her gaily:

"Well, old thing? That keeping you warm?"

She had been so terrified of my expulsion, since I could have

accused her of being the cause of it, that she bore me no resentment.

"I should just think it is keeping me warm! You've got a jolly heavy hand, you know! You must be crazy to fly into a rage like that."

"Come on, let's forget it. I think I must have had a rather violent nervous twitch in my right arm."

Somehow or other, she managed to rub out the "belt" of her decanter and I finished off mine. Mademoiselle Aimée corrected our drawings with feverish, shaky fingers.

This morning I found the playground empty—or very nearly. On the staircase of the Infants' School, a great deal of talking was going on; voices were calling to each other and shrieking: "Do be careful!"—"Gosh, it's heavy!" I rushed up.

"What's everyone doing?"

"You can see for yourself," said Anaïs. "We're helping their ladyships to move out of here and go into the new building."

"Quick, give me something to carry!"

"There's plenty of stuff up there—go and find some."

I went upstairs into the Headmistress's room, the room where I had spied at the door. I was inside it at last! Her old peasant mother, her starched cap all askew, entrusted me and Marie Belhomme with carrying down a big hamper containing all her daughter's toilet things. She does herself well, the Redhead! Her dressing-table was furnished with every conceivable object: large and small cut-glass bottles, nail-buffers, scent-sprays, tweezers and powder-puffs. There was also a huge washbasin and jug. All those weren't at all the typical toilet accessories of country schoolmistresses. To be sure of this, one had only to look at Mademoiselle Aimée's toilet things, as well as those belonging to that pale, silent Grisct, which we transported afterwards—a basin, a water-jug of very modest dimensions, a little round mirror, a toothbrush, some soap, and that was all. Nevertheless, that little Aimée was very smartly dressed, especially these last few weeks, all bedizened and scented. How did she manage it?

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Five minutes later, I noticed that the bottom of her water-jug was dusty. Good; *that* problem was solved.

The new building, which contained three classrooms and a dormitory on the first floor, together with the assistant-mistresses' little rooms, was still too chilly for my taste, and smelt disagreeably of plaster. Between the two, they were erecting the main municipal building which would comprise the Town Hall on the ground floor and various private apartments on the first and would link up the two wings already completed.

As I was coming downstairs again, I had the marvellous idea of climbing the scaffolding, as the builders were still at lunch. In a moment I had skimmed up a ladder and was wandering about among the "scaffolds" and thoroughly enjoying myself. Bother! There were the workmen coming back! I hid behind a piece of masonry, waiting for a chance to climb down again, but they were already on the ladder. Well, those two wouldn't give me away, even if they did see me. I knew both of them well by sight.

They lit their pipes and began to chat.

"You can bet your boots, I wouldn't lose any sleep over *that* one."

"Which one d'you mean?"

"That there new teacher what come yesterday."

"Coo, she don't half look miserable—not a bit like them other two."

"Don't you talk to me about them other two, they fair make me sick. I'm fed up with them, anyone'd think they was husband and wife. Every blooming day, I see them from here and every blooming day it's the same thing. They starts kissing like anything, then they shuts the window and you can't see nothing more. Don't you so much as mention 'em again! Oh, I grant you the little one's a nice juicy piece, but I'm through, I tell you. And that other master who's going to marry her! That chap must have his eyes stuck together with mud to do such a bloody silly thing!"

I was enjoying myself hugely, but, as the bell was ringing for

school, I only had just time to climb down on the inside (there were ladders all over the place), and I arrived, white with plaster and mortar. I was lucky to get off with a sharp: "Where have you sprung from? If you get yourself so dirty, you won't be allowed to help with moving the furniture again." I was jubilant at having heard the builders talk about those two women with so much good sense.

Reading out loud. *Selected passages.* Bother! To distract myself, I unfolded on my lap a copy of the *Écho de Paris*, brought in case of boring lessons: I was enjoying Lucien Muhlfeld's thrilling *Mauvais Désir*, when Mademoiselle Sergent called upon me: "Claudine, read on from there." I hadn't the faintest idea where we had got to, but I hurriedly stood up, determined to "do something desperate" rather than let my paper be pinched. At the very moment I was thinking of upsetting an inkpot, tearing a page out of my book or shouting "Long live Anarchy!", someone knocked at the door. . . . Mademoiselle Lanthénay rose, opened the door and effaced herself and Dutertre appeared.

Had that doctor buried all his patients then, that he had so much spare time? Mademoiselle Sergent ran to meet him; he shook hands with her, glancing meanwhile at little Aimée, who had turned bright pink and was laughing in an embarrassed way. But why? She wasn't as shy as all that! All those people were beginning to wear me out by forcing me to be incessantly trying to find out what they were thinking or doing. . . .

Dutertre had obviously seen me, since I was standing up, but he contented himself with smiling at me from a distance and remained close to those two females. All three of them were chatting together in an undertone: I sat down demurely and watched. Suddenly, Mademoiselle Sergent—who had not left off lovingly contemplating the handsome District Superintendent—raised her voice and said: "You can go and see for yourself now, Monsieur; I'll go on with the children's lesson and Mademoiselle Lanthénay will show you the way. You'll easily identify the crack I was telling you about. It runs from top to bottom of the new wall, on the left of the bed. It's decidedly worrying in a new

house and I can't sleep with an easy mind." Mademoiselle Aimée did not answer and made a slight gesture of objecting. Then she changed her mind and disappeared, ahead of Dutertre who held out his hand to the Headmistress and shook hers vigorously, as if to thank her.

I certainly did not regret not having been expelled, but, however used I was to their astonishing behaviour and their peculiar morals, this dumbfounded me. I asked myself what she hoped to gain by sending this chaser of skirts and this young girl off together to her room to examine a crack which, I was ready to swear, was non-existent.

"There's a *cracked* story for you!" I whispered this observation into the ear of the gawky Anaïs. She gripped her knees together and chewed india-rubber frantically to show her delight in these dubious happenings. Fired by her example, I pulled a packet of cigarette-papers out of my pocket (I *only* eat the kind called *Nil*) and chewed enthusiastically.

"I say, old thing," said Anaïs, "I've discovered something gorgeous to eat."

"What? Old newspapers?"

"No—the lead in these pencils that are red one end and blue the other—you know the kind. The blue end is slightly better. I've already pinched five from the stationery cupboard. It's delicious!"

"Give me a bit to try. . . . No, not up to much. I'll stick to my *Nil*."

"Idiot, you don't know what's good!"

While we were talking in whispers, Mademoiselle Sergent was making little Luce read aloud. But she was too preoccupied to listen to her. I had an idea! What excuse could I invent to get that child put beside me in class? I would try and make her tell me all she knew about her sister Aimée. She would probably talk all right . . . all the more as she followed me, whenever I went through the classroom, with startled, curious eyes that had a hint of a smile in them. They were green eyes—a strange green that turned brown in shadow—and edged with long, black lashes.

What a long time they were staying over there! Wasn't she

going to come and hear us our geography, that shameless little creature?

"I say, Anaïs, it's two o'clock."

"Well, what of it? Nothing to moan about! Wouldn't be half bad if we got off having to be heard the lesson. Done your map of France, old thing?"

"So, so. . . Haven't finished the canals. I say, it wouldn't do for the Regional Inspectors to turn up today. He'd find everything in a fine old mess. You look. . . Mademoiselle Sergent isn't paying any attention to us . . . she's got her nose glued to the window!"

Anaïs was suddenly convulsed with laughter.

"What can they be doing? I can see Monsieur Dutertre from here, measuring the width of the crack."

"Do you think it's wide, the crack?" asked Marie Belhomme innocently. She was shading in her mountain chains by rolling an unevenly sharpened drawing-pencil over her map.

Such guilelessness made me give a spurt of laughter. Had it been too loud? No, Anaïs reassured me.

"Go on, you needn't worry. Mademoiselle's so absorbed, we could dance in the classroom without getting ourselves punished."

"Dance? Want to have a bet with me that I will?" I said, getting up quietly.

"Oh! I bet you two glass alleys that you won't dance without catching a verb to write out!"

Delicately, I removed my sabots and placed myself in the middle of the classroom between the two rows of tables. Everyone raised their heads: obviously the promised feat had excited lively interest. Now for it! I threw back my hair which was getting in my way, I picked up my skirt between two fingers and I began a "red-hot polka" which roused no less general admiration for being silent. Marie Belhomme was exultant and could not restrain a yelp of delight, deuce take her! Mademoiselle Sergent started and turned round, but I had already hurled myself back on my bench like lightning and I heard the headmistress inform the little idiot, in a distant, bored voice:

"Marie Belhomme, you will copy me out the verb *to laugh*

in medium round hand. It is really very tiresome that big girls of fifteen cannot behave themselves properly unless one has one's eye on them."

Poor Marie had a good mind to cry. Still, one shouldn't be as silly as that! And I promptly claimed the two marbles from Anaïs who handed them over with somewhat ill grace.

What could those two crack-observers be up to? Mademoiselle Sergent was still looking out of the window. It struck half-past two; they could not be much longer now. At least she must be made aware that we had noticed the unwonted absence of her little favourite. I coughed, but without success. I coughed again and asked in a virtuous voice, the voice of the Jauberts:

"Mademoiselle, we have some maps for Mademoiselle to look over. Is there a geography lesson today?"

The Redhead turned round sharply and shot a glance at the clock. Then she frowned with annoyance and impatience.

"Mademoiselle Aimée will be back in a moment. You know quite well that I sent her over to the new school. You can go over your lesson while you are waiting—you can never know it thoroughly enough."

Good! It was quite possible we shouldn't have to recite our homework today. There was much joy and a buzz of activity as soon as we knew we had nothing to do. Then the comedy of "going over the lesson" began. At each table, a girl took up her book while her neighbour closed hers and was supposed to repeat the lesson or to answer the questions her companion asked her. Out of twelve girls, the Jaubert twins were the only ones who really went over their work. The rest asked each other fantastic questions, preserving earnest, diligent expressions and serious lips that seemed to be reciting under their breath. The gawky Anaïs had opened her atlas and was interrogating me:

"What is a lock?"

I answered, as if I were repeating something by heart:

"Tst! Don't go and bore me with your old canals: look at Mademoiselle's expression, it's more amusing."

"What do you think of the conduct of Mademoiselle Aimée Lanthénay?"

"I think she's frequenting shady haunts with the District Superintendent, overseer of cracks."

"What is known as a 'crack'?"

"A fissure, sometimes called in French a *lézarde* or a female lizard. This lizard should normally be found in a wall but it is sometimes met with elsewhere, even in places completely sheltered from the sun."

"What is known as a 'fiancée'?"

"A hypocritical little slut who plays tricks on an assistant-master who's in love with her."

"What would you do in the place of the said assistant-master?"

"I'd give the District Superintendent a good hard kick on the backside and I'd give the little pet who takes him off to observe cracks a couple of smart slaps."

"What would be the result of that?"

"The arrival of another assistant-master and another assistant-mistress."

The lanky Anaïs hoisted up her atlas from time to time to giggle behind it. But I had enough. I wanted to go outside, to try and see *them* coming back. The only thing was to employ vulgar means.

"Mmmselle? . . ."

No reply.

"Mmmselle, beg pard'n, c'n I leave the room?"

"Yes, go, and don't be long."

She said it carelessly and listlessly: obviously her whole mind was over there in the room where the new wall might be cracked. I went out hurriedly, ran over to the lavatories (they were "temporary" too!) and stayed close to a door, pierced with a lozenge-shaped hole, ready to take refuge in the loathsome little kiosk if anyone came. At the very moment I was about to return despairingly to the classroom—for, alas, the customary time had elapsed—I saw Dutertre emerging (all alone) from the new school, putting on his gloves with a satisfied air. He was not

coming back here but going straight off to the town. Aimée was not with him, but I didn't care; I had seen enough already. I turned to go back to the classroom but suddenly drew back, frightened. Twenty paces away—behind a new wall six foot high which sheltered the boys' little "convenience" (exactly like ours and equally temporary)—there had appeared the head of Armand. Poor Duplessis, pale and ravaged, was staring in the direction of our new school. I saw him for five seconds, then he disappeared, running at full speed along the path that led to the woods. I was not laughing any more. What was going to be the end of all this? I went indoors, quickly, without further lingering.

The class was still seething. Marie Belhomme had drawn a set of squares on the table and was gravely playing a pleasant game of noughts and crosses with the newly-arrived little Lanthénay—poor little Luce!—who must find this a fantastic school. And Mademoiselle Sergent was still looking out of the window.

Anaïs, who was in process of colouring the portraits of the most hideous men in the *History of France* with crayons, welcomed me with a "Come on, what did you see?"

"No more joking, old thing! Armand Duplessis was spying on them over the wall by the lavatories. Dutertre has gone back to the town and Richelieu's dashed off, running like a madman!"

"Go on! I bet you're telling lies!"

"I assure you I'm not. This is no time for lying. I saw it, on my honour, I did! My heart's in a positive flutter!"

The hope of the drama that might ensue kept us silent for a moment. Anaïs asked:

"Are you going to tell the others?"

"Good heavens, no. Those dunderheads would spread it all over the place. Only Marie Belhomme. I say, Marie!"

I told all to Marie whose eyes grew rounder than ever and who prophesied: "It'll all end badly!"

The door opened and we all turned our heads in a single movement. It was Mademoiselle Aimée, a little out of breath and her colour high. Mademoiselle Sergent ran up to her and checked, only just in time, the hug she was on the point of giving

her. The Headmistress had come to life again; she drew the little slut over to the window and questioned her avidly. (And what about our geography lesson?)

The prodigal child showed no excessive emotion as she gave brief answers which did not appear to satisfy the curiosity of her worthy superior. To a more anxious question she replied "No," shaking her head with a mischievous sigh. At that, the Redhead heaved a sigh of relief. We three, at the front table, looked on, rigid with attention. I felt some alarm for that immoral little thing. I would definitely have warned her to beware of Armand but the other, her tyrant, would promptly have alleged that I had gone and denounced her behaviour to Richelieu, by means of anonymous letters, perhaps. So I refrained.

They were beginning to irritate me with their whisperings! So I decided to make an end of them. I emitted a low "hush!" to attract my classmates' attention and we began to buzz. At first the buzz was no more than a continuous bee-like hum; then it rose and swelled until it forced an entrance into the ears of our infatuated teachers, who exchanged an uneasy glance. But Made-moiselle Sergent boldly took the offensive:

"Silence! If I hear any buzzing, I shall keep the class in until six o'clock! Do you suppose we can give you regular lessons as long as the new school remains unfinished? You are old enough to know that you ought to work on your own when one of us is prevented from acting as your teacher. Give me an atlas. Any girl who does not know her lesson without one mistake will do one extra homework for a week!"

Whatever you may say, she's got character, that ugly, passionate, jealous woman; everyone was silent the moment she raised her voice. The lesson was recited at top speed and no one felt any inclination to be frivolous for we could feel a threatening breeze blowing, laden with imports and detentions. While this was going on, I thought that nothing would console me if I were not present at the meeting of Armand and Aimée; I would rather have got myself expelled (much as that would have cost me) than not see what would happen.

At five minutes past four, when the daily "shut your books and get into line" sounded in our ears, I went off, sorely against my will. Well, the exciting, unhopèd-for tragedy wasn't billed for today! I would arrive early at school tomorrow so as to miss nothing of what might happen.

The next morning, having arrived long before the official time, I had time to kill. So I began a desultory conversation with the shy, melancholy Mademoiselle Grisèet who was as pale and nervous as ever.

"Do you like it here, Mademoiselle?"

She looked all round her before answering:

"Oh, not very much. I don't know anyone. I feel a little dull."

"But isn't your colleague nice to you . . . and Mademoiselle Sergent too?"

"I . . . I don't know. No, really, I don't know if they're nice; they never pay any attention to me."

"How extraordinary!"

"Yes . . . at meals they talk to me a little, but once the exercise-books are corrected they go off and I'm left all alone with Mademoiselle Sergent's mother who clears the table and then shuts herself up in the kitchen."

"And where do they go off to, the two of *them*?"

"Why, to their room."

Did she mean to their *room* or their *rooms*? Poor little *wretch*! She certainly earned her seventy-five francs a month!

"Would you like me to lend you some books, Mademoiselle, if you're bored in the evenings?"

(What joy! Her face turned almost pink with it!)

"Oh, I should love that. . . . Oh, how very kind of you . . . you don't think it would annoy the Headmistress?"

"Mademoiselle Sergent? If you think she'd even know, you've still got illusions about the interest that Redhead takes in you!"

She smiled, almost confidently, and asked me if I would lend her *Roman d'un Jeune Homme Pauvre* which she was just longing to read! Certainly, she should have it tomorrow, her romantic novelette. I felt sorry for her, poor abandoned creature!

I might easily have raised her to the rank of an ally, but how could one rely on this pathetic, anæmic, far too timid girl?

The favourite's sister, little Luce Lanthénay, came up with noiseless steps, at once pleased and scared to be talking to me.

"Good morning, little monkey: say 'Good morning, Your Highness' to me. Say it at once. Did you sleep well?"

I stroked her hair roughly. This did not seem to displease her and she smiled at me with her green eyes that were exactly like those of Fanchette, my beautiful cat.

"Yes, Your Highness, I slept well."

"Where do you sleep?"

"Up there."

"With your sister Aimée, of course?"

"No, she has a bed in Mademoiselle Sergent's room."

"A bed? Have you seen it?"

"No . . . I mean, yes . . . it's a divan. Apparently it can be opened up into bed. She told me so."

"She told you so? Fathead! Dim donkey! Nameless object! Scum of the human race!"

She was terror-stricken for I had punctuated my abuse with lashes with a book-strap (oh, not very hard lashes!) and, when she vanished up the stairs, I shouted this crowning insult after her: "Twirp of a female! You deserve to be like your sister!"

A divan that opened up! It would be easier for me to open up this wall! Upon my word, kids like that don't notice anything! Yet she looks vicious enough, that child, with those eyes that slant up at the corners . . .

The gawky Anaïs arrived while I was still panting and asked what was the matter with me.

"Nothing at all. I've merely beaten little Luce to teach her a thing or two."

"Is there any news?"

"None at all. No one's come down yet. D'you want to play marbles?"

"What game? Haven't got nine alleys to play 'Square'."

"But I've got the two I won off you. Come on, we'll have a chase."

We went into class and Mademoiselle Sergent left us in the hands of her favourite who asked us the results of the problems set the day before.

"Anaïs, to the blackboard. Read out the terms of the problem."

It was a fairly complicated problem but the lanky Anaïs, who is gifted for arithmetic, moved with remarkable ease among mail-coaches, watch-hands and proportional shares. Then—horror!—it was my turn.

"Claudine, to the blackboard. Extract the square root of two million, seventy-three thousand, six hundred and twenty."

I professed an intolerable loathing for those little things you have to extract. And, as Mademoiselle Sergent wasn't there, I suddenly decided to play a trick on my ex-friend; she had only herself to blame, the fickle wretch! I hoisted the standard of rebellion. Standing in front of the blackboard, I shook my head and said gently: "No."

"What do you mean, no?"

"No, I don't want to extract roots today. It doesn't appeal to me."

"Claudine, have you gone mad?"

"I don't know, Mademoiselle. But I feel that I shall fall ill if I extract this root or any other like it."

"Do you want a punishment, Claudine?"

"I want anything in the world, except roots. It isn't because I'm disobedient, it's because I can't extract roots. I'm awfully sorry, I assure you."

The class jumped for joy; Mademoiselle Aimée lost patience and raged.

"Once and for all, will you obey me? I shall report you to Mademoiselle Sergent and then we shall see."

"I repeat, I'm simply in despair."

Internally, I shrieked at her: "Nasty little bitch, I'm not going to show *you* any consideration. On the contrary, I'll do everything I can to annoy you."

She descended the two stairs from the desk and advanced on me, in the vague hope of intimidating me. With great difficulty,

I stopped myself from laughing and preserved my expression of respectful regret. . . . That tiny little thing! Upon my word, she only came up to my chin! The class was enjoying itself hugely; Anaïs was eating a pencil, both the wood and the lead, in great mouthfuls.

"Mademoiselle Claudine, are you going to obey, yes or no?"

With exaggerated mildness, I began again; she was quite close to me, so I lowered my voice a trifle:

"Once again, Mademoiselle, make me do anything you like . . . give me fractions to reduce to the same denomination, similar triangles to construct . . . *cracks to verify* . . . anything, anything, at all. But not that, oh *not* square roots."

The rest of the class, with the exception of Anaïs, had not taken it in, for I had slipped in my impertinence quickly, without stressing it. The other girls were merely amused by my resistance but Mademoiselle Lanthénay had received a shock. Turning scarlet, she lost her head and said shrilly:

"That's . . . that's too much! I shall go and call Mademoiselle Sergent. . . . Oh, it's really too much!"

She made a bee-line for the door. I ran after her and caught her up in the corridor while the class laughed uproariously, shrieked with joy and climbed up on the benches and stood on them. I held Aimée back by her arm while she tried with all her feeble strength to throw my hands off. She did not say a word; she did not look at me and she kept her teeth clenched.

"Now will you listen to me when I speak to you! We've got beyond the stage of making small-talk, you and I. I swear to you that if you report me to Mademoiselle Sergent, I shall go straight and tell your fiancé the story of the crack. *Now* do you still mean to go up to the Headmistress's room?"

She had stopped dead, still without saying a word; her eyes were obstinately lowered and her mouth compressed.

"Come on, say something! Are you coming back to the classroom with me? If you don't come back at once, *I* shan't go back either; I shall go and warn your Richelieu. Hurry up and choose."

At last, she opened her lips and whispered, without looking

at me: "I won't say anything. Let me go, I won't say anything."

"You really mean it? You realise that if you tell the Redhead about it, she won't be able to keep it to herself for five minutes and I shall soon know. You really mean it? It's a . . . promise?"

"I won't say anything, let me go. I'll come straight back to the classroom."

I let go her arm and we went back without a word. The noise of the hive stopped abruptly. My victim, at the desk, laconically ordered us to make a fair copy of the problems. Anaïs asked me under her breath: "Did she go up and tell?"

"No, I made my humble excuses. You see, I didn't want to push a joke like that too far."

Mademoiselle Sergent did not return. Her little assistant retained her shut face and her hard eyes till the end of the class. At half-past ten, we were already thinking about going home. I took some cinders from the stove to stuff them in my sabots, an excellent means of warming them—officially forbidden, that goes without saying. But Mademoiselle Lanthénay's mind was far from cinders and sabots! She was sullenly ruminating her anger and her golden eyes were two cold topazes. I didn't care. In fact, I was even delighted.

Whatever was that? We pricked up our ears. Shouts; a man's voice cursing, mingled with another voice trying to drown it . . . were some of the builders having a fight? I did not think so; I sensed something else. Little Aimée was standing up, very pale; she too felt that something else was coming. Suddenly Mademoiselle Sergent flung herself into the classroom; the crimson had fled from her cheeks.

"Girls, go home at once. It isn't time, but that doesn't matter. . . . Off with you, off with you—don't get into line. Do you understand, get out!"

"Whatever's the matter?" shrieked Mademoiselle Lanthénay.

"Nothing, nothing . . . but get them to go and don't *you* stir from here. Better lock the door. . . . Haven't you gone yet, you little idiots!"

Obviously, circumspection had gone to the winds! Rather than

leave the school at such a moment, I would have let myself be flayed alive! I went out in the general scurry of my bewildered classmates. Outside, the vociferating voice could be clearly heard. . . . Good heavens! It was Armand, more livid than a drowned man, his eyes hollow and wild. He was stained green all over with moss, and there were twigs in his hair—he had obviously slept in the woods. . . . Mad with rage after that night spent in brooding over his misery, he wanted to rush into the classroom, yelling and brandishing his fists: Rabastens was holding him back with both arms and rolling his eyes in terror. What a fuss! What a scene!

Marie Belhomme fled, frightened out of her wits, the Second Division behind her; Luce vanished—I had just time to catch her malicious little smile; the Jauberts had run to the playground-door without turning their heads. I could not see Anaïs but I could have sworn she was huddled in some corner and not losing any of the spectacle.

The first word I heard distinctly, was “Trollops!” Armand had dragged his panting colleague right into the classroom where our mute mistresses stood clasping each other tight. He shouted: “Whores! I’m not going to go without telling you what you are, even if I do lose my job for it! Filthy little bitch! Ah, so you let yourself be fumbled for money by that swine of a District Inspector! You’re worse than a street walker but *that* one there is even worse than you, that damned redhead who’s making you like herself. Two bitches, two bitches, you’re two bitches, this house is . . .” I did not hear what. Rabastens, who must have double muscles like Tartarin de Tarascon, succeeded in dragging away the unfortunate man who was choking with insults. Mademoiselle Griset, losing her head, pushed the little girls, who were coming out of the small classroom, back into it again and I escaped, my heart rather shaken. But I was glad that Duplessis had exploded without further delay for Aimée could not now accuse me of having warned him.

When we returned in the afternoon, the one and only person we found there was Mademoiselle Griset who repeated the same

phrase to each new arrival. "Mademoiselle Sergent is ill and Mademoiselle Lanthénay is going home to her family; you're not to come back to school for a week."

Fine, so off we went. But, honestly, this is no ordinary school!

II

During the week of unexpected holidays which this commotion procured for us, I went down with measles. This compelled me to spend three weeks in bed, then another fortnight convalescing. And they kept me in quarantine still another fortnight on the pretext of "school safety". If I hadn't had books and Fanchette, however should I have got through it! That doesn't sound very kind to Papa, yet he looked after me as if I were a rare slug. Convinced that one must give a little invalid everything she asks for, he brought me *marrons glacés* to make my temperature go down! Fanchette spent a whole week on my bed, washing herself from ears to tail, playing with my feet through the blanket and nestling in the hollow of my shoulder as soon as I stopped smelling of fever. I returned to school, a little thinner and paler, and immensely curious to see that extraordinary "teaching staff" again. I'd had so little news during my illness! No one came to see me, not even Anaïs or Marie Belhomme, for fear of possible infection.

Half-past seven was striking when I entered the playground on a morning in late February that was as mild as spring. At once I was surrounded and everyone made a fuss of me. The two Jauberts conscientiously asked me whether I was completely cured before coming near me. I was a little stunned by all this noise. At last they let me breathe and I hastily asked the lanky Anaïs the latest news.

"I'll tell you all. Armand Duplessis has left, to begin with."

"Sacked or sent somewhere else, poor old Richelieu?"

"Only sent somewhere else. Dutertre got busy finding him another post."

"Dutertre?"

"Naturally! If Richelieu had talked, that would have stopped the District Superintendent from ever becoming a Deputy. Dutertre has been solemnly saying all over the town that the unfortunate young man had had a very dangerous attack of brain-fever and that they'd called him in, as school doctor, just in time."

"Ah! So they called him in just in time? Providence had planted the remedy next door to the ill. . . . And Mademoiselle Aimée? Sent away too?"

"Certainly not! Oh, *she's* in no danger! By the end of a week, he didn't appear any more. And she was giggling with Mademoiselle Sergent just as usual."

It was too much! That odd little creature who had neither heart nor brain, who lived without memory and without remorse, would begin all over again. She would humbug an assistant-master and romp with the District Superintendent until there was another crisis and she would live quite contentedly with that jealous, violent woman who was going to pieces as a result of these adventures. I hardly heard Anaïs telling me that Rabastens was still there and was constantly inquiring after me. I'd forgotten him, that pathetic lout Antonin!

The bell rang but it was the new school that we trooped into now. And the central building that linked the two wings was almost finished.

Mademoiselle Sergent installed herself at the desk that was all new and shining. Farewell the old rickety, scarred, uncomfortable tables; now we sat down at handsome sloping ones, provided with benches with backs to them and desks with hinged lids. We were only two to a bench now; instead of the lanky Anaïs, I now had as my neighbour . . . little Luce Lanthénay. Luckily the tables were extremely close together and Anaïs was near me, at a table parallel to mine, so that we could gossip together as comfortably as before. They had put Marie Belhomme

beside her for Mademoiselle Sergent had intentionally placed the two "lively" ones (Anaïs and me), next to two "torpid" ones (Luce and Marie) so that we should shake them up a little. We certainly would shake them up! At least I would, for I could feel all the rebelliousness that had been suppressed during my illness boiling up in me. I took in my new surroundings and arranged my books and exercise-books, while Luce sat down and watched me with a sidelong, timid glance. But I didn't deign to speak to her yet: I merely exchanged remarks about the new school with Anaïs who was avidly nibbling some unknown substance that looked to me like green buds.

"Whatever are you eating—old crab-apples?"

"Lime buds, old thing. Nothing so good. Now's just the moment, when it's getting on for March."

"Give us a bit? . . . Really, it's awfully good. It's sticky, like the gum on fruit-trees. I'll get some off the limes in the playground. And what other hitherto unknown delicacies are you stuffing yourself with nowadays?"

"Oh, nothing startling. I can't even eat coloured pencils any more. This year's lot are gritty. Beastly—absolute rubbish. However, to make up for that, the blotting-paper's excellent. There's also something good to chew, but not to swallow . . . the samples of handkerchief linen that the Bon Marché and the Louvre send out."

"Ugh! That doesn't appeal to me in the least. . . . I say, young Luce, are you going to try and be good and obedient sitting here beside me? Otherwise, I promise you slaps and pinches. So beware!"

"Yes, Mademoiselle," answered the little thing, looking none too reassured, with her lashes downcast on her cheeks.

"You can say '*tu*' to me. Look at me, so as I can see your eyes? That's right. Now, you know that I'm mad, I'm sure you've been told that. Well, if anyone annoys me, I become furious and I bite and scratch, especially since my illness. Give me your hand: there, that's what I do."

I dug my nails into her hand; she did not squeal, only tightened her lips.

"You didn't yell, good. I'll put you through questioning at recreation."

In the Second classroom, whose door had been left open, I had just witnessed the entrance of Mademoiselle Aimée. Fresh, curled, and rosy, she wore her coaxing, mischievous expression and her eyes were more velvety and golden than ever. Little trollop! She flashed a radiant smile at Mademoiselle Sergent who forgot herself for a moment in contemplating her, then came out of her ecstasy and addressed us sharply:

"Your exercise-books. History essay: *The war of 1870*. Claudine," she added more gently, "can you do this essay in spite of not having followed the classes these last two months?"

"I'm going to try, Mademoiselle: I'll do the essay with less detailed development, that's all."

I did, in fact, dash off a little essay. It was excessively short and, when I got towards the end, I lingered over it and applied myself to it, spinning out the last fifteen lines so as to be able to spy and ferret out what was going on about me. The Headmistress, the same as ever, preserved her expression of concentrated passion and jealous daring. Her Aimée, who was carelessly dictating problems in the other classroom, wandered closer and closer while she read aloud. All the same, last winter, she did not have that confident, coquettish walk—the walk of a spoilt pussy-cat! Now she was the adored, cherished little animal that is developing into a tyrant, for I caught glances from Mademoiselle Sergent that implored her to find some pretext to bring her over to her, glances to which the scatterbrained creature replied with capricious shakes of her head and amused eyes that said No. The Redhead, who had definitely become her slave, could bear it no longer and went across to her, asking very loud: "Mademoiselle Lanthénay, you haven't got the Attendance Register in your room, have you?" Good, she had gone; they were chattering in whispers. I took advantage of this solitude in which we were left to put little Luce through a severe inquisition.

"Ah, ah, let that exercise-book alone, will you and answer my questions. Is there a dormitory upstairs?"

"Oh yes. We sleep there now, the boarders and me."

"All right. You're a dolt."

"Why?"

"That's none of your business. Do you still have singing-lessons on Thursdays and Sundays?"

"Oh, we tried to have one without you, Mademoiselle. . . Claudine, I mean, but it didn't go a bit well. Monsieur Rabastens doesn't know how to teach us."

"Good. Has the cuddler been here while I was ill?"

"Who's that?"

"Dutertre."

"I can't remember. . . . Oh yes, he did come once, but not into the classrooms. And he only stayed a few minutes talking to my sister and Mademoiselle Sergent in the playground."

"Is she nice to you, the Redhead?"

Her slanting eyes darkened.

"No . . . she tells me I've no intelligence . . . that I'm lazy . . . that my sister must have taken all the intelligence in the family as she's taken all the beauty. . . . Anyway, it's always the same story wherever I've been with Aimée: people only pay attention to her and *I'm* pushed into the background. . . ."

Luce was on the verge of tears in her fury against this sister who was more "fetching" as they say here and who thrust her aside and eclipsed her. For all that, I didn't think her any better than Aimée: only shyer and more timid because she was used to remaining lonely and silent.

"Poor kid! You've left friends over there, where you used to be?"

"No, I didn't have any friends. The girls were too rough and used to laugh at me."

"Too rough? Then it upsets you when I beat you or push you about?"

She laughed, without raising her eyes:

"No, because I realise that you . . . that you don't do it cruelly, out of beastliness . . . well, that it's a kind of joke and you don't really mean it. It's like when you call me 'dolt', I know

it's only for fun. In fact, I quite like feeling a bit frightened, when there isn't the least danger."

Tralala! They're both alike, these two little Lanthenays; cowardly, naturally perverse, egotistical and so devoid of all moral sense that it's amusing to watch them. All the same, this one detested her sister and I thought I could drag any number of revelations about Aimée out of her by cramming her with sweets and also by beating her.

"Have you finished your essay?"

"Yes, I've finished . . . but I didn't know the stuff a bit . . . I'm sure I'll get rotten marks. . . ."

"Give me your exercise-book."

I read her essay, which was very so-so; then I dictated some things she'd forgotten and remodelled her sentences a little. She was in a welter of joy and astonishment and observed me slyly, with surprised, enchanted eyes.

"There, you see, it's better like that. . . . Tell me, do the boarders in the boys' school have their dormitory opposite yours?"

Her eyes lit up with mischief.

"Yes, and at night they go to bed at the same time as we do, on purpose. And, you know, the windows have no shutters so the boys try and see us in our chemises. We lift up the corners of the curtains to look at *them* and it's no good, Mademoiselle Griset keeping watch on us till the light's put out. We always find a way of pulling a curtain right up, all of a sudden, and that makes the boys come back every night to spy."

"Well, well! You have a gay time undressing up there!"

"We certainly do!"

She was becoming lively and more familiar. Mademoiselle Sergeant and Mademoiselle Lanthenay were still together in the Second classroom. Aimée showed the Redhead a letter and the two of them burst out laughing, but they kept their laughter very low.

"Do you know where your sister's ex-Armand has gone to bury his sorrows, young Luce?"

"No, I don't. Aimée never talks to me about her private affairs."

"I thought as much. Has she got her room upstairs too?"

"Yes, the nicest and most comfortable of the assistant-mistresses' rooms—much prettier and warmer than Mademoiselle Griset's. Mademoiselle's had curtains with pink flowers put in it and linoleum on the floor, my dear, and a goatskin rug. And they've enamelled the bed white. Aimée even wanted to make me believe that she'd bought all these lovely things out of her savings. I told her straight: 'I'll ask Mamma if it's true.' Then she said: 'If you mention it to Mamma, I'll have you sent back home on the excuse that you're not working.' So, as you can imagine, there was nothing for me to do but keep my mouth shut."

"Ssh. Mademoiselle's coming back."

And, indeed, Mademoiselle was approaching, abandoning her tender, laughing expression for her school-mistress's face.

"Have you finished, girls? I am going to dictate you a problem in geometry."

Dolorous protests arose, demanding another five minutes' grace. But Mademoiselle Sergent was not moved by these supplications, which were repeated three times a day, and began calmly to dictate the problem. Heaven confound similar triangles!

I was careful to bring sweets to school often with the object of seducing young Luce completely. She took them, hardly saying thank you, filled her little hands with them and hid them in an old mother-of-pearl rosary-case. For ten sous' worth of too-hot English peppermints, she would have sold her big sister and one of her brothers into the bargain. She opened her mouth, breathed in the air so as to feel the cold of the peppermint and exclaimed: "My tongue's freezing, my tongue's freezing," her eyes rapturous. Anaïs shamelessly begged sweets of me, stuffed her cheeks with them, then hastily asked again, with an irresistible grimace of affected disgust:

"Quick, quick . . . give me some more to take the taste away—those had gone bad."

As if by chance, while we were playing "He," Rabastens came into the playground, bearing some exercise-books or other as an

excuse. He feigned an amiable surprise at seeing me again and profited by the occasion to thrust a love-song under my nose. He proceeded to read its amorous words in a cooing voice. Poor noodle of an Antonin, you're no longer any use to me now—and you never were *much* use! The very most you're good for is to keep me amused for a little while and to excite the jealousy of my schoolfriends. If only you'd go away. . . .

"Monsieur, you'll find those ladies in the end classroom. I think I saw them coming downstairs . . . weren't they, Anaïs?"

Thinking I was sending him away on account of the malignant glances of my companions, he threw me an eloquent look and departed. I shrugged my shoulders at the "Hmm-Hms" I heard from the lanky Anaïs and from Marie Belhomme and we went on with an exciting game of "turn-the-knife" in which the beginner, Luce, made mistake after mistake. She's young, poor thing, she doesn't know! The bell rang for class.

It was a sewing-lesson, a test for the examination. That is to say they made us do the samples of sewing, demanded in the exam, in one hour. We were handed out small squares of linen and Mademoiselle Sergent wrote up on the blackboard, in her clear writing, full of strokes like hammers:

Buttonhole.—Ten centimetres of whipping. Initial G in marking-stitch. Ten centimetres of hem in running-stitch.

I groaned at this announcement because I could just manage the buttonhole and the whipping but the running-stitch hem and the initial in marking-stitch were things I didn't "execute to perfection", as Mademoiselle Aimée noted with regret. Luckily I had recourse to a simple and ingenious device. I gave little Luce, who sews divinely, some sweets and she worked a marvellous G for me. "We must help one another." (Very appropriately, we had commented on this charitable aphorism only the day before.)

Marie Belhomme had confected a letter G that looked like a squatting monkey and, in her usual cheerful, crazy way, was roaring with laughter at her own work. The boarders, with their heads bent and their elbows held in, were talking imperceptibly as they sewed. From time to time they exchanged meaning looks with Luce in the direction of the boys' school. I suspected that, at

night, they spied some amusing spectacles from the vantage-point of their peaceful white dormitory.

Mademoiselle Lanthénay and Mademoiselle Sergent had exchanged desks; it was Aimée who invigilated our sewing-lesson while the Headmistress was making the girls in the Second class read aloud. The favourite was occupied in inscribing the title of an Attendance Register in a beautiful round hand when her Red-head called out to her from the distance:

"Mademoiselle Lanthénay!"

"What do you want?" cried Aimée. Thoughtlessly, she used the familiar "*tu*".

There was a stupefied silence. We all looked at each other: Anaïs began to clutch her ribs so as to be able to laugh longer; the two Jauberts bent their heads over their sewing; the boarders slyly dug each other with their elbows; Marie Belhomme burst out in a stifled laugh that sounded like a sneeze, and, at the sight of Aimée's face of consternation, I exclaimed out loud:

"Ah! She's so awfully kind!"

Little Luce was hardly laughing at all. It was obvious that she must have heard them address each other in that intimate way before. But she was staring at her sister with mocking eyes.

Mademoiselle Aimée turned on me furiously:

"Anyone may happen to make a mistake at times, Mademoiselle Claudine! And I apologise to Mademoiselle Sergent for my slip of the tongue!"

But the latter, having recovered from the shock, was quite aware that we should not swallow the explanation. She shrugged her shoulders as a sign of giving up in face of the irremediable blunder. This made a gay finale to the boring sewing-lesson. I'd badly needed this sprightly distraction.

When school was over at four o'clock, I did not go straight home. Instead, I astutely forgot an exercise-book and came back. I knew that, during the time for sweeping, the boarders took turns to carry water up to their dormitory. I did not know that dormitory yet; I wanted to visit it and Luce had told me: "*Today, I'm doing the water.*" Treading like a cat, I climbed upstairs, carrying a full pail in case of awkward encounters. The dormitory

had white walls and a white ceiling and was furnished with eight white beds. Luce showed me hers but I hadn't the faintest interest in her bed! I went straight to the windows which did, indeed, let one see into the boys' dormitory. Two or three big boys of fourteen or fifteen were prowling about it and looking in our direction: as soon as they saw us, they laughed and gesticulated and pointed to their beds. A lot of scamps! All the same, how tempting they are! Luce, shocked or pretending to be, hurriedly shut the window. But I'm pretty sure that, at bedtime, she displays less prudishness. The ninth bed, at the end of the dormitory, was placed under a kind of canopy that shrouded it in white curtains.

"That," explained Luce, "that's the mistress on duty's bed. The assistant-mistresses are supposed to take it in turn, week by week, to sleep in our dormitory."

"Ah! So it's sometimes your sister Aimée, sometimes Mademoiselle Griset?"

"Well, of course . . . that's how it ought to be . . . but up to now, it's always Mademoiselle Griset. . . . I don't know why."

"Ah, so you don't know why? Hypocrite!"

I gave her a bang on the shoulder; she complained, but without conviction. Poor Mademoiselle Griset!

Luce went on enlightening me:

"At night, Claudine, you simply can't imagine what fun we have when we go to bed. We laugh, we run about in our chemises, we have pillow-fights. Some of the girls hide behind the curtains to get undressed because they say it embarrasses them. The oldest one, Rose Raquenot, washes so little that her underclothes are grey by the end of the three days she wears them. Yesterday, they hid my nightdress so I had to stay in the wash-room, absolutely naked. Luckily Mademoiselle Griset came along! Then we make fun of one of them who's so plump she had to powder herself all over with starch so as not to chafe herself. Oh, and I'd forgotten Poisson who wears a nightcap that makes her look like an old woman and who won't undress till we've all left the wash-room. Oh, believe me, we have heaps of fun!"

The wash-room was scantily furnished with a big zinc-covered

table on which stood a row of eight basins, eight tablets of soap, pairs of towels and eight sponges. All these objects were exactly alike: the linen was marked in indelible ink. It was all very neatly kept.

I inquired:

"Do you have baths?"

"Yes . . . and that's something else that's frightfully funny! In the new wash-house they heat up a huge wine-vat full of water . . . as big as a room. We all get undressed and we cram ourselves into it to soap ourselves."

"Quite naked?"

"Of course—how'd we manage to soap ourselves otherwise? Rose Raquenot didn't want to strip, of course, because she's too thin. If you could only see her," added Luce, lowering her voice, "She's got practically nothing on her bones, and it's absolutely flat on her chest, like a boy! But Jousse is just the reverse. She's like a wet-nurse, *they* are as big as that! And the one who wears an old woman's nightcap—you know, Poisson—she's got hair all over like a bear, and she's got blue thighs."

"What do you mean, blue?"

"Yes, really blue. Like when it's freezing and your skin's blue with cold."

"It must be most engaging!"

"Oh, no, it certainly isn't. If I were a boy, I wouldn't be a bit keen on having a bath with her!"

"But mightn't it have more effect on *her*, having a bath with a boy?"

We giggled, but I started at the sound of the voice and the footsteps of Mademoiselle Sergent in the corridor. So as not to be caught, I hid myself under the canopy reserved for the unique occupation of Mademoiselle Griset. Then, when the danger had passed, I escaped and dashed downstairs, calling out "Good-bye" under my breath.

Next morning, how good my dear countryside looked! How gaily my pretty Montigny was sunning itself in this warm, precocious spring! Last Sunday and Thursday, I'd already ranged through the delicious woods, full of violets, with my co-First

Communicant, my gentle Claire. She told me all about her flirtations . . . ever since the weather had turned mild her "follower" arranged for them to meet in the evening at the corner of the Fir Plantation. Who knows if she won't end up by going too far! But it's not *that* which attracts her. Provided someone pours out choice words she doesn't quite understand, provided someone kisses her and goes down on his knees and everything happens *like it does in books* . . . well, she's perfectly satisfied.

In the classroom, I found little Luce collapsed over a table, sobbing fit to choke herself. I raised her head by main force and saw that her eyes were swollen as big as eggs, she'd dabbed them so much.

"Oh! Really! You look far from beautiful like that! What's the matter, little thing? What are you *blubbing* about?"

"She . . . she . . . b-beat me!"

"Do you mean, your sister?"

"Ye-e-es!"

"What had you done to her?"

She dried her eyes a little and began to tell her story.

"You see, I hadn't understood my problems, so I hadn't done them. That put her in a temper, so she said I was a dolt, that it wasn't worth while our parents' paying my fees, that she was disgusted with me, and so on and so on. . . . So I answered back: 'Oh, you bore me stiff.' Then she beat me, she slapped my face. She's a beastly, horrible scold. I loathe her."

There was a fresh deluge.

"My poor Luce, you're a goose. You shouldn't have let yourself be beaten, you should have thrown her ex-Armand in her teeth. . . ."

The sudden scare in the little thing's eyes made me turn round: I caught sight of Mademoiselle Sergent listening to us from the doorway. Help! What was she going to say?

"My compliments, Mademoiselle Claudine. You are giving this child some pretty advice."

"And you a pretty example!"

Luce was terrified by my reply. As for me, I didn't care in the least. The Headmistress's fiery eyes were glittering with rage and

emotion! But this time, too subtle to lose her temper openly, she shook her head and merely observed:

"It's lucky the month of July is not far off, Mademoiselle Claudine. You realise, don't you, that it's becoming more and more impossible for me to keep you here?"

"Apparently. But, you know, it's due to our misunderstanding each other. Our relationship got off on the wrong foot."

"Go off to recreation, Luce," she said, without answering me.

The little thing did not wait to be told twice. She left the room at a run, blowing her nose. Mademoiselle Sergent went on:

"It's entirely your own fault, I assure you. You showed yourself full of ill-will towards me when I first arrived and you have repelled all my advances. For I made you plenty of them, though it was not my place to do so. All the same, you seemed to me intelligent—and pretty enough to interest me . . . who have neither sister nor child."

Hanged if I'd ever thought of it. . . . I couldn't have been more clearly told that I would have been "her little Aimée" if I'd been willing. Well, well! No, that meant nothing to me, even in retrospect. Nevertheless, it would have been me of whom Mademoiselle Lanthénay would have been jealous at this very moment. . . . What a comedy!

"That's true, Mademoiselle. But, as fate would have it, it would have turned out badly all the same, on account of Mademoiselle Aimée Lanthénay. You put so much fervour into acquiring her . . . friendship—and into destroying any she might have for me!"

She averted her eyes.

"I did not seek, as you pretend I did, to destroy. . . . Mademoiselle Aimée could have gone on giving you her English lessons without my preventing her. . . ."

"For goodness' sake don't say that! I'm not quite an idiot and there are only the two of us here! For a long time I was furious about it, devastated even, for I'm very nearly as jealous as you are. . . . Why did you take her? I've been so unhappy, yes, there, you can be pleased, I've been so unhappy! But I realise now that she didn't care for me—who *does* she care for? I've

realised too that she's not really worth much: that was enough for me. I've thought that I'd do quite enough foolish things without committing the folly of wanting to take her away from you. There! Now the only thing I want is that she shouldn't become too much the little queen of this school and that she shouldn't over-torment that little sister of hers who's fundamentally no better—and no worse—than she is, I assure you. . . . I never tell tales at home—never—about anything I may see here. I shan't come back again after the holidays and I shall sit for the Certificate because Papa's got it into his head that he's keen on it and because Anaïs would be only too delighted if I didn't pass the exam. . . . You might leave me in peace till then—I don't torment you at all nowadays. . . .”

I could have gone on talking for a long time, I think, but she was no longer listening to me. I was not going to contend with her for her little darling, that was all she had been interested to hear. Her gaze had become introspective: she was pursuing an idea of her own. She roused herself, suddenly becoming the Headmistress again, after this conversation on an equal footing, and said to me:

“Hurry out to the playground, Claudine. It's after eight, you must get into line.”

“What were you chattering so long about in there with Mademoiselle?” demanded the lanky Anaïs. “Does that mean you're matey with her, now?”

“Two girls together, my dear!”

In the classroom, little Luce squeezed up close to me, threw me affectionate looks and clasped my hands. But her caresses irritated me; I only like hitting her and teasing her and protecting her when the others upset her.

Mademoiselle Aimée came into the classroom like a whirlwind, exclaiming in a loud whisper: “The Inspector! The Inspector!” There was an uproar. Anything is an excuse for disorder here; under cover of arranging our books with impeccable neatness, we opened all our desks and chatted hurriedly behind the lids. The lanky Anaïs sent all the completely distracted Marie Belhomme's

exercise-books flying and prudently thrust a *Gil Blas Illustré*, that she had concealed between two pages of her *History of France*, into her pocket. I myself hid Rudyard Kipling's marvelously-told stories of animals (there's a man who really knows about them!)—though they were hardly very reprehensible reading. We buzzed, we stood up, we gathered up papers, we took out the sweets hidden in our desks, for this venerable Blanchot, the Inspector, has eyes that squint but that poke into everything.

Mademoiselle Lanthénay, in her own classroom, was hustling the little girls, tidying her desk, shouting and flapping about. And, now, from the third room, there appeared the wretched Griset, in great dismay, demanding help and protection.

"Mademoiselle Sergent, will the Inspector ask to see the little ones' exercise-books? They're dreadfully dirty . . . the smallest ones can only do pothooks. . . ." The malicious Aimée laughed in her face; the Headmistress replied with a shrug: "You'll show him whatever he asks to see, but if you think he'll bother with your urchins' copy books—!" And the pathetic, dazed creature returned to her classroom where her little beasts were making an appalling din, for she hadn't a ha'porth of authority.

We were ready, or as near as maybe. Mademoiselle Sergent exclaimed: "Quick, get out your selected pieces! Anaïs, spit it out at once, that slate-pencil you have in your mouth! On my word of honour, I'll turn you out in front of Monsieur Blanchot if you go on eating those revolting things! Claudine, couldn't you stop pinching Luce Lanthénay for one single instant? Marie Belhomme, take those off at once, those three scarves you have on your head and round your neck. And also take that stupid expression off your face. You're worse than the little ones in the Third Class and not one of you is worth the rope to hang you with!"

She simply had to discharge her nervous irritation. The Inspector's visits always upset her because Blanchot was on good terms with the Deputy who detested his possible successor Dutertre, who was Mademoiselle Sergent's protégé, like poison. (Heavens, how complicated life is!) At last everything was more or less in order; the lanky Anaïs stood up, looking quite alarm-

ingly tall, her mouth still dirty from the grey pencil she had been nibbling, and began *The Dress* by that maudlin poet Manuel:

*In the wretched garret where daylight scarce could pierce
Wife and husband argued in a quarrel fierce. . . .*

Only just in time! A tall shadow passed across the panes giving on to the corridor; the entire class shuddered and rose to its feet—out of respect—at the moment when the door opened to admit old Blanchot. He had a solemn face framed in large pepper-and-salt whiskers and a formidable Franche-Comté accent. He pontificated, he chewed his words enthusiastically like Anaïs chewing india-rubber, he was always dressed with a stiff, old-fashioned correctness; what an old bore! Now we were in for a whole hour of him! He would be sure to ask us idiotic questions and prove to us that we ought all to “embrace the career of teaching”. I’d rather do even that than embrace *him*!

“Young ladies! . . . Sit down, my children.”

“His children” sat down, modest and mild. I wished to goodness I could get away. Mademoiselle Sergent danced attendance on him with an expression at once respectful and malevolent, while her assistant, the virtuous Lanthénay, shut herself up in her own classroom.

Monsieur Blanchot placed his silver-headed cane in a corner and promptly began to exasperate the Headmistress (well done!) by drawing her over to the window to talk about Certificate syllabuses, zeal, assiduity and all that sort of thing! She listened, she replied: “Yes, Inspector.” Her eyes had retreated under her brows; she was obviously longing to hit him. He had finished boring her; now it was our turn.

“What was that girl reading when I came in?”

Anaïs, the “girl” in question, hid the pink blotting-paper she was chewing and broke off the narrative, obviously a scandalous one, she was pouring into the ears of Marie Belhomme. The latter, shocked and crimson but attentive, rolled her birdlike eyes with a modest dismay. Smutty Anaïs! What could those stories possibly be?

"Come, my child, tell me what you are reading."

"*The Dress*, Sir."

"Kindly continue."

She began again, with an air of mock intimidation, while Blanchot examined us with his dirty-green eyes. He was severe on any hint of coquetry and he frowned when he saw a black velvet ribbon on a white neck or curly tendrils escaping over forehead and temples. He always scolded *me* every time he visited us about my hair, which was always loose and curly, and also about the big white pleated collars I wore on my dark dresses. Although these had the simplicity I like, they were attractive enough for him to find my clothes appallingly reprehensible. The lanky Anaïs had finished *The Dress* and he was making her logically analyse (oh, my goodness!) five or six lines of it. Then he asked her:

"My child, why have you tied that black velvet about your neck?"

Now we were in for it! What did I tell you? Anaïs, flummoxed, answered idiotically that it was "to keep her warm". Cowardly fat-head!

"To keep you warm, you say? Don't you think a scarf would have served that purpose better?"

A scarf! Why not a woollen muffler, you doddering old bore? I couldn't help laughing and this drew his attention to myself.

"And you, my child, why is your hair not properly done and hanging all loose instead of being twisted up on your head and secured with hairpins?"

"Sir, that gives me migraines."

"But you could at least plait it, I presume?"

"Yes I could, but Papa doesn't like me to."

I can't tell you how he irritated me! After a disapproving little smack of his lips, he went and sat down and tormented Marie Belhomme about the War of Secession, one of the Jauberts about the coastline of Spain and the other about right-angle triangles. Then he sent me to the blackboard and ordered me to draw a circle. I obeyed. It was a circle . . . if you choose to call it one.

"Inside it, inscribe a rose-window with five lights. Assume

that it is lit from the left and indicate with heavy strokes the shadows the petals receive."

That didn't bother me at all. If he'd wanted to make me calculate figures, I'd have been in a hopeless mess but I knew all about rose-windows and shadows. I got through it quite well, much to the annoyance of the Jauberts who were sneakily hoping to see me scolded.

"That's . . . good. Yes, that's not bad at all. You're sitting for the Certificate Examination this year?"

"Yes, Sir, in July."

"Then, no doubt, you wish to enter the Training College afterwards?"

"No, Sir. I shall go back home."

"Indeed? As a matter of fact, in my opinion, you have not the slightest vocation for teaching. Very regrettable."

He said that exactly as if he were saying: "In my opinion, you are an infanticide." Poor man, let him keep his illusions! But I could only wish he had been able to see the Armand Duplessis drama or the way we were left on our own for hours while our two mistresses were upstairs, billing and cooing. . . .

"Be so good as to show me your Second Class, Mademoiselle."

Mademoiselle Sergent took him off to the Second classroom where she remained with him to protect her little darling against inspectorial severity. I profited by his absence to sketch a caricature of old Blanchot and his huge whiskers on the blackboard. This sent the girls into ecstasies. I added donkey's ears, then I quickly rubbed it out and went back to my place. Little Luce slipped her arm coaxingly under mine and tried to kiss me. I pushed her away with a light slap and she pretended that I was "simply horrid" !

"Simply horrid? I'll teach you to take liberties like that with me! Try and muzzle your feelings and tell me if it's still always Mademoiselle Griset who sleeps in the dormitory."

"No, Aimée's slept there twice two days running."

"That makes four times. You're a duffer; not even a duffer, a total nitwit! Do the boarders keep quieter when it's your chaste sister who's sleeping under the canopy?"

"Not a bit. And one night even, when one of the girls was ill, we got up and opened a window . . . I even called out to my sister to give us some matches because we couldn't find any, and she didn't budge. She didn't breathe any more than if there were no one in the bed at all! Does that mean that she's a very heavy sleeper?"

"Heavy sleeper! Heavy sleeper! What a goose you are! Good Lord, why have You allowed beings so utterly deprived of intelligence to exist on this earth? They make me weep tears of blood!"

"What have I done now?"

"Nothing! Oh, nothing at all! Only here come some thumps on your back to improve your heart and your wits and teach you not to believe in the virtuous Aimée's alibis."

Luce squirmed over the table in mock despair, ravished at being bullied and pummelled. But I had suddenly remembered something:

"Anaïs, whatever were you telling Marie Belhomme that raised such blushes that the nation's over the Bastille pale beside them?"

"What Bastille?"

"Never mind. Tell me quick."

"Come a bit closer."

Her vicious face was sparkling; it must have been something very sordid.

"All right, then. Didn't you know? Last New Year's Eve, the Mayor had his mistress at his house—the fair Julotte—and, besides, his secretary had brought a woman from Paris. Well, at dessert, they made them both undress . . . take off even their chemises, and they did the same. And they set to and danced a quadrille like that, old dear!"

"Not bad! Who told you that?"

"It was Papa who told Mamma. I was in bed, only they always leave my bedroom door open because I pretend I'm frightened and so I hear everything."

"Your home life must be far from dull. Does your father often tell stories like that?"

"No, not always such good ones. But sometimes I roll about in my bed with laughing."

She told me some more pretty dirty bits of gossip about our neighbourhood: her father works at the Town Hall and knows every scrap of scandal in the district. I listened to her and the time passed.

Mademoiselle Sergent returned: we had only just time to open our books at random, but she came straight up to me without looking at what we were doing.

"Claudine, could you make your classmates sing in front of Monsieur Blanchot? They know that pretty two-part song now—*Dans ce doux asile*."

"I'm perfectly willing. Only it makes the Inspector so sick to see me with my hair loose that he won't listen!"

"Don't say silly things, this isn't the day for them. Hurry up and make them sing. Monsieur Blanchot seems decidedly dissatisfied with the Second Class; I'm counting on the music to smooth him down."

I had no difficulty in believing that he must be decidedly dissatisfied with the Second Class: Mademoiselle Aimée Lanthénay occupies herself with it whenever she has nothing else to do. She gorges her girls with written work so as to be able to chat peacefully with her dear Headmistress while they're scribbling. I was perfectly willing to make the girls sing, whatever it cost me!

Mademoiselle Sergent brought back the odious Blanchot: I ranged our class and the first division of the Second in a semi-circle and entrusted the firsts to Anaïs and the seconds to Marie Belhomme (unfortunate seconds!). I would sing both parts at once; that's to say I'd quickly change over when I felt one side weakening. Off we went! One empty bar: one, two, three.

*Dans ce doux asile
Les sages sont couronnés,
Venez!
Aux plaisirs tranquilles
Ces lieux charmants sont destinés. . . .*

What luck! That tough old pedagogue nodded his head to the rhythm of Rameau's music (out of time, as it happened), and appeared enchanted. It was the story of the composer Orpheus taming the wild beasts all over again.

"That was well sung. By whom is it? By Gounod, I believe?" (Why does he pronounce it *Gounode*?)

"Yes, Sir." (Don't let's annoy him.)

"I was sure it was. It is an extremely pretty piece."

(Pretty piece yourself!)

On hearing this unexpected attribution of a melody of Rameau's to the author of *Faust*, Mademoiselle Sergent compressed her lips so as not to laugh. As to Blanchot, now serene once more, he uttered a few amiable remarks and went away, after having dictated to us—as a Parthian shot—this theme for a French composition:

"Explain and comment on this thought of Franklin's: Idleness is like rust, it wears a man out more than work."

Off we go! Let us contrast the shining key, with its rounded contours which the hand polishes and turns in the lock twenty times a day, with the key eaten away with reddish rust. The good workman who labours joyously, having risen at dawn, whose brawny muscles, etcetera; etcetera. . . . Let us set him against the idler, who lying languidly on oriental divans, watches rare dishes, etc.; etc. . . . succeed each other on his sumptuous table, etc.; etc. . . . dishes which vainly attempt to reawaken his appetite, etc.; etc. . . . Oh, that won't take long to hash out!

Nonsense, of course, that it isn't good to laze in an armchair! Nonsense, of course, that workers who labour all their life don't die young and exhausted! But naturally one mustn't say so. In the "Examination Syllabus" things don't happen as they do in life.

Little Luce was lacking in ideas and whining in a low voice for me to provide her with some. I generously let her read what I had written; she wouldn't get much from me.

At last it was four o'clock. We went off home. The boarders went upstairs to eat the refreshments Mademoiselle Sergent's mother had prepared for them. I left with Anaïs and Marie Bel-

homme after having looked at my reflection in the window-panes to make sure my hat wasn't crooked.

On the way, we shared a sugar-loaf and castigated Blanchot as if we were breaking it over his back. He bores me stiff, that old man, who wants us always to be dressed in sackcloth and wear our hair scraped back.

"All the same, I don't think he's awfully pleased with the Second Class," remarked Marie Belhomme. "If you hadn't wheedled him round with the music!"

"What d'you expect?" said Anaïs, "Mademoiselle Lanthénay doesn't exactly over-exert herself with anxiety over the welfare of her class."

"The things you say! Come, come, she can't do everything! Mademoiselle Sergent has attached her to her person—she's the one who dresses her in the morning."

"Oh, that's bunkum!" Anaïs and Marie exclaimed both at once.

"It isn't bunkum in the least! If ever you go into the dormitory and into the mistresses' rooms (it's awfully easy, you've only to take some water up with the boarders), run your hand over the bottom of Mademoiselle Aimée's basin. You needn't be afraid of getting wet, there's nothing but dust in it."

"No, that's going a bit far, all the same!" declared Marie Belhomme.

The lanky Anaïs made no further comment and went away meditating; no doubt she would pass on all these charming details to the big boy with whom she was flirting that week. I knew very little about her escapades; she remained secretive and sly when I sounded her about them.

I was bored at school; a tiresome symptom and quite a new one. Yet I wasn't in love with anyone. (Indeed, perhaps that was the reason.) I was so apathetic that I did my schoolwork almost accurately, and I was quite unmoved as I watched our two mistresses caressing each other, billing and cooing and quarrelling for the pleasure of being more affectionate than ever when they made it up. Their words and gestures to each other were so uninhibited nowadays that Rabastens, in spite of his self-possession,

was taken aback by them and spluttered excitably. Then Aimée's eyes would gleam with delight like those of a mischievous cat and Mademoiselle Sergent would laugh at seeing her laughing. Upon my word, they really were amazing! It's fantastic, how exacting the little thing has become! The other changes countenance at the faintest sigh from her, at a pucker of her velvety eyebrows.

Little Luce is acutely conscious of this tender intimacy: she watches every move, hot on the trail, and learns things for herself. Indeed she is learning a great deal for she seizes every opportunity of being alone with me, and brushes up against me coaxingly, her green eyes almost closed and her fresh little mouth half-open. But no, she doesn't tempt me. Why doesn't she transfer her attentions to the lanky Anaïs who is also highly interested in the goings-on of the two love-birds who serve us as teachers in their spare moments and who is extremely surprised at them, for she is oddly ingenuous in some ways?

This morning I beat little Luce to a jelly because she wanted to kiss me in the shed where they keep the watering-cans. She didn't yell but began to cry until I comforted her by stroking her hair. I told her:

"Silly, you'll have plenty of time to work off your superfluous feelings later on, as you're going on to the Training College!"

"Yes, but *you're* not going on there!"

"No, thank goodness! But you won't have been there two days before two "Third Years" will have quarrelled over you, you disgusting little beast!"

She let herself be insulted with voluptuous pleasure and threw me grateful glances.

Is it because they've changed my old school that I'm so bored in this one? I no longer have the dusty "nooks" where one could hide in the passages of that rambling old building where one never knew whether one was in the staff's quarters or in our own and where it was so natural to find oneself in a master's room that one hardly needed to apologise on returning to the classroom.

Is it because I'm getting older? Can I be feeling the weight

of the sixteen years I've nearly attained? That really would be too idiotic for words.

Perhaps it's the spring? It's also too fine—almost indecently fine! On Thursdays and Sundays I go off all alone to meet my First Communion partner, my little Claire, who's heavily embarked on an absurd adventure with the Secretary at the Town Hall who doesn't want to marry her. From all accounts, there's an excellent reason that prevents him! It seems that, while he was still at college, he underwent an operation for some peculiar disease, one of those diseases whose "seat" is never mentioned, and people say that, if he still wants girls, he can never again "satisfy his desires". I don't understand awfully well, in fact I don't really understand at all, but I'm sick and tired of passing on to Claire what I've vaguely learnt. She turns up the whites of her eyes, shakes her head, and replies, with an ecstatic expression: "Oh, what does that matter, what does that matter? He's so handsome, he has such a lovely soft moustache and, besides, the things he says to me make me quite happy enough! And then, he kisses me on the neck, he talks to me about poetry—and sunsets—whatever more d'you expect me to want?" After all, if that satisfies her . . .

When I've had enough of her ravings, I tell her I'm going home to Papa so that she'll leave me on my own. But I don't go home. I stay in the woods and I hunt out a particularly delicious corner and lie down there. Hosts of little creatures scamper over the ground under my nose (they even behave extremely badly sometimes, but they're so tiny!) and there are so many good smells there—the smell of fresh plants warming in the sun. . . . Oh, my dear woods!

I arrived late at school (I find it hard to go to sleep: my thoughts start dancing in my head the moment I turn out the lamp), to find Mademoiselle Sergent at the mistress's desk, looking dignified and scowling, and all the girls wearing suitable prim, ceremonious expressions. Whatever did all that mean? Ah, the gawky Anaïs was huddled over her desk, making such tremendous efforts to sob that her ears were blue with the exertion. I

was going to have some fun! I slid in beside little Luce, who whispered in my ear: "My dear, they've found all Anaïs's letters in a boy's desk and the master's just brought them over for the Headmistress to read!"

She was, indeed, reading them but very low, only to herself. What bad luck. Heavens, what bad luck! I'd cheerfully have given three years of Antonin Rabastens's life to go through that correspondence. Oh! would no one inspire the Redhead to read us two or three well-chosen passages out loud? Alas, alas, Mademoiselle Sergent had come to the end. . . . Without a word to Anaïs, who was still hunched over her table, she solemnly rose and walked over, with deliberate steps, to the stove beside me. She opened it, deposited the scandalous papers, folded in four, inside; then she struck a match, applied it to the letters, and closed the little door. As she stood up again, she said to the culprit:

"My compliments, Anaïs, you know more about these things than many grown-up people do. I shall keep you here until the exam, since your name is entered for it, but I shall tell your parents that I absolve myself from all responsibility for you. Copy out your problems, girls, and pay no more attention to this person who is not worth bothering about."

Incapable of enduring the torture of having Anaïs's effusions burn, I had taken out the flat ruler I use for drawing while the Headmistress was majestically declaiming. I slipped the ruler under my table and, at the risk of getting caught, I used it to push the little handle that moved the damper. No one saw a thing: perhaps the flame, thus stifled of draught, would not burn everything up. I should know when class was over. I listened; the stove stopped roaring after a few seconds. Wouldn't it soon strike eleven? I could hardly keep my mind on what I was copying, on the "two pieces of linen which, after being washed, shrank $\frac{1}{19}$ in length and $\frac{1}{22}$ in breadth; they could have shrunk considerably more without my being interested.

Mademoiselle Sergent left us and went off to Aimée's classroom, no doubt to tell her the good story and laugh over it with

her. As soon as she had disappeared, Anaïs raised her head. We stared at her avidly: her cheeks were blotched and her eyes were swollen from having been violently rubbed, but she kept her eyes obstinately fixed on her exercise-book. Marie Belhomme leant over to her and said with vehement sympathy: "I say, old thing, I bet you'll get a fearful wiggling at home. Did you say lots of awful things in your letters?" Anaïs did not raise her eyes but said out loud so that we should all hear: "I don't care a fig, the letters weren't mine." The girls exchanged indignant looks: "My dear, would you believe it! My dear, what a liar that girl is!"

At last, the hour struck. Never had break been so long in coming! I dawdled over tidying my desk so as to be the last one left behind. Outside, after having walked fifty yards or so, I pretended I'd forgotten my atlas and I left Anaïs in order to fly back to school: "Wait for me, will you?"

I dashed silently into the empty classroom and opened the stove: I found a handful of half-burnt papers in it which I drew out with the most tender precautions. What luck! the top and bottom ones had gone but the thick wad in the middle was almost intact; it was definitely Anaïs's writing. I took the packet away in my satchel so as to read them at home at leisure, and I rejoined Anaïs, who was quite calm, and strolling about while she waited for me. We set off again together: she stared at me surreptitiously. Suddenly, she stopped dead and gave an agonised sigh. . . . I saw her gaze was anxiously fixed on my hands and then I noticed they were black from the burnt papers I had touched. I wasn't going to lie to her—certainly not. I took the offensive:

"Well, what's the matter?"

"So you went and searched in the stove, eh?"

"Certainly I did! No danger of my losing a chance like that of reading your letters!"

"Are they burnt?"

"No, luckily: here, look inside."

I showed her the papers, keeping a firm hold on them. She

darted positively murderous looks at me but did not dare pounce on my satchel, she was too sure I'd thrash her! I decided to comfort her a little; she made me feel almost sorry for her.

"Listen, I'm going to read what isn't burnt—because I just can't bear not to—and then I'll bring you the whole lot back this afternoon. So I'm not such a beast after all, am I?"

She was highly mistrustful.

"Word of honour! I'll give you them back at recreation before we go into class."

She went off, helpless and uneasy, looking even longer and yellower than usual.

At home, I went through those letters at last. Immense disappointment! They weren't a bit what I'd imagined. A mixture of silly sentimentalities and practical directions: "I always think of you when there's moonlight. . . . Do make sure, on Thursday, to bring the corn-sack you took last time, to Vrimes' field; Mamma would kick up a shindy if she saw grass-stains on my frock!" Then there were obscure allusions which must have reminded young Gangneau of various smutty episodes. . . . In short, yes, a disappointment. I would give her back her letters which were far less amusing than her cold, whimsical, humorous self.

I gave them back to her; she could not believe her own eyes. She was so overjoyed at seeing them that she couldn't resist making fun of me for having read them. Once she'd run and thrown them down the lavatory, she resumed her shut, impenetrable face, without the faintest trace of humiliation. Happy disposition!

Bother, I've caught a cold! I stay in Papa's library, reading Michelet's absurd *History of France*, written in alexandrines. (Am I exaggerating a bit?) I'm not in the least bored, curled up in this big armchair, surrounded by books, with my beautiful Fanchette for company. She's the most intelligent cat in the world and she loves me disinterestedly in spite of the miseries I inflict on her, biting her in her pink ears and making her go through the most complicated training.

She loves me so much that she understands what I say and

comes and rubs against my mouth when she hears the sound of my voice. She also loves books like an old scholar, this Fanchette, and worries me every night after dinner to remove two or three volumes of Papa's big Larousse from their shelf. The space they leave makes a kind of little square room in which Fanchette settles down and washes herself; I shut the glass door on her and her imprisoned purr vibrates with a noise like an incessant, muffled drum. From time to time, I look at her; then she makes me a sign with her eyebrows which she raises like a human being. Lovely Fanchette, how intelligent and understanding you are! (Much more so than Luce Lanthénay, that inferior breed of cat!) You amused me from the moment you came into the world; you'd only got one eye open when you were already attempting warlike steps in your basket, though you were still incapable of standing up on your four matchsticks. Ever since, you've lived joyously, making me laugh with your belly-dances in honour of cockchafers and butterflies, your clumsy calls to the birds you're stalking, your way of quarrelling with me and giving me sharp taps that re-echo on my hands. Your behaviour is quite disgraceful: two or three times a year I catch you on the garden walls, wearing a crazy, ridiculous expression, with a swarm of tom-cats round you. I even know your favourite, you perverse Fanchette—he's a dirty-grey Tom, long and lean, with half his fur gone. He's got ears like a rabbit's and coarse, plebeian limbs. How can you make a *mésalliance* with this low-born animal, and make it so often? But, even at those demented seasons, as soon as you catch sight of me, your natural face returns for a moment, and you give me a friendly mew which says something like: "You see what I'm up to. Don't despise me too much, nature has her urgent demands. But I'll soon come home again and I'll lick myself for ages to purify myself of this dissolute life." O, beautiful Fanchette, your bad behaviour is so remarkably becoming to you!

When my cold was over, I observed that people at school were beginning to get very agitated about the approaching exams; we were now at the end of May and we "went up" on the 5th of

July! I was sorry not to be more moved, but the others made up for me, especially little Luce Lanthénay, who burst into floods of tears whenever she got a bad mark. As for Mademoiselle Sergent, she was busy with everything, but most of all, with the little thing with the beautiful eyes who kept her "on a string". She'd blossomed out, that Aimée, in an astonishing way! Her marvellous complexion, her velvety skin and her eyes, "that you could strike medals out of", as Anaïs says, make her into a spiteful and triumphant little creature. She is so much prettier than she was last year! No one would pay any more attention now to the slight crumpling of her face, to the little crease on the left of her lip when she smiles; and, anyhow, she has such white, pointed teeth! The amorous Redhead swoons at the mere sight of her and our presence no longer restrains her from yielding to her furious desire to kiss her darling every two minutes.

On this warm afternoon, the class was murmuring a *Selected Passage* that we had to recite at three o'clock. I was almost dozing, oppressed by a nervous lassitude. I was incapable of any more effort, when all of a sudden I felt I wanted to scratch somebody, to give a violent stretch and to crush somebody's hands; the somebody turned out to be Luce, my next-door neighbour. She found the nape of her neck being clutched and my nails digging into it. Luckily, she didn't say a word. I fell back into my irritated listlessness. . . .

The door opened without anyone having even knocked: it was Dutertre, in a light tie, his hair flying, looking rejuvenated and pugnacious. Mademoiselle Sergent sprang to her feet, barely said good afternoon to him and gazed at him with passionate admiration, her tapestry fallen unheeded on the floor. (Does she love him more than Aimée? or Aimée more than him? Curious woman!) The class had stood up. Out of wickedness, I remained seated, with the result that, when Dutertre turned towards us, he noticed me at once.

"Good afternoon, Mademoiselle. Good afternoon, little ones. *You* seem in a state of collapse!"

"I'm floppy. I haven't a bone left in me."

"Are you ill?"

"No, I don't think so. It's the weather—general slackness."

"Come over here and let's have a look at you."

Was all that going to start over again . . . those medical pretexts for prolonged examinations? The Headmistress launched looks of blazing indignation at me for the way I was sitting and for the way I was talking to her beloved District Superintendent. I decided to put myself out and obey. Besides, he adores these impertinent manners. I dragged myself lazily over to the window.

"One can't see here because of that green shadow from the trees. Come out into the corridor, there's some sunlight there. You look wretched, my child."

Triple-distilled lie! I looked extremely well. I know myself: if it was because I had rings round my eyes that he thought I was ill, he was mistaken. It's a good sign when I have dark circles under my eyes, it means I'm in excellent health. Luckily it was three in the afternoon, otherwise I should have been none too confident about going out, even into the glass-paned corridor, with this individual whom I mistrust like fire.

When he had shut the door behind us, I rounded on him and said:

"Now, look here, I *don't* look ill. Why did you say I did?"

"No? What about those eyes with dark circles right down to your lips?"

"Well, it's the colour of my skin, that's all."

He had seated himself on the bench and was holding me in front of him, standing against his knees.

"Shut up, you're talking nonsense. Why do you always look as if you were cross with me?"

". . . ?"

"Oh yes, you know quite well what I mean. You know, you've got a nice, funny little phiz that sticks in one's head once one's seen it!"

I gave an idiotic laugh. If only heaven would send me some wit, some smart repartee, for I felt terribly destitute of them!

"Is it true you always go for walks all by yourself in the woods?"

"Yes, it's true. Why?"

"Because, you little hussy, perhaps you go to meet a lover? You're so well chaperoned!"

I shrugged my shoulders.

"You know all the people round here as well as I do. Do you see any of *them* as a possible lover for me?"

"True. But you might be vicious enough. . . ."

He gripped my arms and flashed his eyes and his teeth. How hot it was here! I would have been only too pleased if he would have let me go back to the classroom.

"If you're ill, why don't you come and consult me at my house?"

I answered too hurriedly, "No! I won't go . . ." and I tried to free my arms, but he held me firmly and raised burning, mischievous eyes to mine. They were handsome eyes too, it's true.

"Oh, you little thing, you charming little thing, why are you frightened? You're so wrong to be frightened of me! Do you think I'm a cad? You've absolutely nothing to fear . . . nothing. Oh, little Claudine, you're so frightfully attractive with your warm brown eyes and your wild curls! You're made like an adorable little statue, I'll swear you are. . . ."

He stood up suddenly, clasped me in his arms and kissed me; I hadn't time to escape, he was too strong and virile, and my head was in a whirl. . . . What a situation! I no longer knew what I was saying, my brain was going round and round. . . . Yet I couldn't go back to the classroom, all red and shaken as I was, and I could hear him behind me. . . . I was certain he was going to want to kiss me again. . . . I opened the front-door, rushed out into the playground and dashed up to the pump where I drank a mug of water. Ouf! . . . I must go back. . . . But he must be ambushed in the passage. Ah! After all, who cares! I'd scream if he tried to do it again. . . . It was because he's kissed me on the corner of the mouth, which was the best he could do, that beast!

No, he wasn't in the corridor. What luck! I went back into the classroom and there I saw him, standing by the desk and calmly

chatting to Mademoiselle Sergent. I sat down in my place; he looked at me searchingly and inquired:

"You didn't drink too much water, I hope? These kids, they swallow mugfuls of cold water, it's shockingly bad for the health."

I was bolder with everyone there.

"No, I only drank a mouthful. That was quite enough, I shan't take any more."

He laughed and looked pleased:

"You're a funny girl. But you're not a complete idiot."

Mademoiselle Sergent did not understand, but the uneasiness that puckered her eyebrows gradually smoothed itself out. All that remained was her contempt for the deplorable manners I displayed towards her idol.

Personally, I was furious with him: he was stupid! The lanky Anaïs guessed that something was up and could not restrain herself from asking me: "I say, did he examine you awfully close to, to make you so upset?" But I certainly wasn't going to tell *her*. "Don't be an idiot! I tell you, I went out to the pump." Little Luce, in her turn, rubbed herself against me like a fidgety cat and ventured to question me: "Do tell me, Claudine darling, whatever made him take you off like that?"

"To begin with I'm not 'Claudine darling' to *you*. And, besides, it's none of your business, you little rat. He had to consult me about the standardisation of pensions. And that's that."

"You never want to tell me anything. And *I* tell *you* all!"

"All what? A fat lot of use it is to me to know that your sister doesn't pay her board or yours either—and that Mademoiselle Olympe heaps her with presents—and that she wears silk petticoats—and that . . ."

"Ssh! Oh, *please*, stop! I'd be absolutely done for if they knew I'd told you all that!"

"Then, don't ask *me* anything. If you're good, I'll give you my lovely ebony ruler, the one with the brass edges."

"Oh, you *are* sweet! I'd like to kiss you but that annoys you. . . ."

"That'll do. I'll give it you tomorrow—if I feel like it!"

For my passion for "desk-furniture" was becoming appeased, which was yet another very bad symptom. All my classmates (and I used to be just like them) were crazy about "school equipment". We ruined ourselves on exercise-books of cream-laid paper bound in shimmering tinfoil with a moiré pattern, on rose-wood pencils, on lacquered penholders shiny enough to see one's face in, on olive-wood pencil-boxes, on rulers made of mahogany or of ebony, like mine, which had its four edges bound with brass and which made the boarders, who were too poor to afford one like it, green with envy. We had big satchels like lawyers' brief cases in more-or-less crushed more-or-less Morocco. And if the girls didn't have their school text-books sheathed in gaudy bindings for their New Year presents, and if I didn't either, it was simply and solely because they were not our own property. They belonged to the Town Council which generously provided us with them on condition we left them at the School when we left it never to return. Moreover, we loathed those bureaucratic books; we didn't feel they belonged to us and we played horrible tricks on them. Unforeseen and fantastic mishaps befell them: some of them had been known to catch fire at the stove, in winter; there were others over which inkpots took a particular delight in upsetting; in fact, they attracted disaster! And all the affronts put upon the dreary "Council Books" were the subject of long lamentations from Mademoiselle Lanthénay and terrible lectures from Mademoiselle Sergent.

Lord, how idiotic women are! (Little girls, women, it's all one.) Would anyone believe that, ever since that inveterate wolf Dutertré's "guilty attempts" on my person, I've felt what might be called a vague pride? It's very humiliating to me, that admission. But I know why; in my heart of hearts, I tell myself: "If that man, who's known heaps of women, in Paris and all over the place, finds me attractive, it must be because I'm not remarkably ugly!" There! It was a pleasure to my vanity. I didn't really think I was repulsive, but I like to be sure I'm not. And besides, I was pleased at having a secret that the lanky Anaïs, Marie Belhomme, Luce Lanthénay and the others didn't suspect.

The class was well trained now. All the girls, even down to those in the Third Division knew that, during recreation, they must never enter a classroom in which the mistresses had shut themselves up. Naturally, our education hadn't been perfected in a day! One or other of us had gone in at least fifty times into the classroom where the tender couple was hiding. But we found them so tenderly entwined, or so absorbed in their whisperings or else Mademoiselle Sergent holding her little Aimée on her lap with such total lack of reserve that even the stupidest were non-plussed and fled as soon as the Redhead demanded: "What do you want *now*?" terrified by the ferocious scowl of her bushy eyebrows. Like the others, I frequently burst in and sometimes even without meaning to: the first few times, when they saw it was me and they were too close together, they hastily got up or else one of them would pretend to pin up the other's loosened hair. But they ended up by not disturbing themselves on my account. So I no longer found it entertaining.

Rabastens doesn't come over any more: he has declared over and over again that he is "too intimidated by this intimacy" and this expression seemed to him a kind of pun which delighted him. As for *them*, they no longer think of anything but themselves. They dog each other's footsteps and live in each other's shadow: their mutual adoration is so absolute that I no longer think of tormenting them. I almost envy their delicious oblivion of everything else in the world.

There! I was sure it would happen sooner or later! A letter from little Luce that I found when I got home, in a pocket of my satchel.

"My Darling Claudine,—I love you very much. You always look as if you didn't know anything about it and that makes me die of misery. You are both nice and nasty to me, you don't want to take me seriously, you treat me as if I were a little dog: you can't imagine how that hurts me. But just think how happy we could be, the two of us; look at my sister Aimée with Mademoiselle, they're so happy that they don't think of any-

thing else now. I implore you, if you're not annoyed by this letter, not to say anything to me tomorrow morning at school, I'd be too embarrassed at that moment. I'll know very well, just from the sort of way you talk to me during the day, whether you want to be my great friend or not.

I kiss you with all my heart, my darling Claudine and I count on you, too, to burn this letter because I know you wouldn't want to show it so as to get me into trouble, that's not your way. I kiss you again very lovingly and I'm longing so impatiently for it to be tomorrow!

Your little Luce."

Good heavens no, I *don't* want to! If that appealed to me, it would be with someone stronger and more intelligent than myself, someone who'd bully me a little, whom I'd obey and not with a depraved little beast who has a certain charm, perhaps, scratching and mewling just to be stroked, but who's too inferior. I don't love people I can dominate. I tore up her letter straight away, charming and unmalicious as it was, and put the pieces in an envelope to return them to her.

The next morning I saw a worried little face pressed against the windows, waiting for me. Poor Luce, her green eyes were pale with anxiety! What a pity, but all the same I couldn't, just for the sake of giving her pleasure. . . .

I went inside; as luck would have it, she was all alone.

"Look, little Luce, here are the bits of your letter. I didn't keep it long, you see."

She said nothing and took the envelope mechanically.

"Crazy girl! Besides, whatever were you doing up there . . . I mean up there on the first floor . . . behind the locked doors of Mademoiselle Sergent's room? That's where that leads you! I can't do anything for you."

"Oh!" she said, prostrated.

"But yes, my poor child. It isn't from virtue, you can be sure. My virtue's still far too small, I don't trot it out and about yet. But you see, in my green youth I was consumed by a great love.

I *adored* a man who died making me swear on his deathbed never to . . .”

She interrupted me, moaning:

“There, there, you’re laughing at me again. I didn’t want to write to you, you’ve no heart. Oh, how unhappy I am! Oh, how cruel you are!”

“And besides, you’re deafening me! What a row! What d’you bet I give you a few kicks to bring you back to the straight and narrow path?”

“Oh, what do I care! Oh, I could almost laugh!”

“Take that, you little bad lot! And give me a receipt.”

She had just been dealt a heavy slap which had the effect of promptly silencing her. She looked at me stealthily with gentle eyes and began to cry, already comforted, as she rubbed her head. How she loves to be beaten; it’s astounding.

“Here come Anaïs and lots of the others, try and look more or less respectable. They’ll be coming in to class in a moment, the two turtle-doves are on their way down.”

Only a fortnight till the Certificate! June oppresses us. We bake, half asleep, in the classrooms; we’re silent from listlessness; I’m too languid to keep my diary. And in this furnace heat, we still have to criticise the conduct of Louis XV, explain the role of the gastric juices in the process of digestion, sketch acanthus leaves and divide the auditory apparatus into the inner ear, the middle ear and the outer ear. There’s no justice on the earth! Louis XV did what he wanted to do, it’s nothing to do with *me*! Oh Lord, no! With *me* less than anyone!

It was so hot that it made one lose one’s desire to make oneself look attractive—or rather, the fashion palpably changed. Now we displayed our skin. I inaugurated dresses with open square necks, something on medieval lines, with sleeves that stopped at the elbow. My arms were still rather thin, but nice all the same, and, as to my neck, I back it against anyone’s. The others imitated me: Anaïs did not wear short sleeves but she profited by mine to roll her own up to the shoulders; Marie Belhomme dis-

played unexpectedly plump arms above her bony hands and a fresh neck that would be fat later on. Oh Lord, what *wouldn't* one display in a temperature like this! With immense secrecy, I replaced my stockings with socks. By the end of three days, they all knew it and told each other about it and implored me under their breath to pull my skirt up.

"Let's see your socks . . . are you really wearing them?"

"Look!"

"Lucky devil! All the same, *I* wouldn't dare."

"Why? Respect for the decencies?"

"No . . . but . . ."

"Shut up, I know why. . . . You've got hair on your legs!"

"Oh, you liar of all liars! You can look. . . . I haven't any more than you have. Only I'd be ashamed to feel my legs quite bare under my dress!"

Little Luce exhibited some skin shyly—skin that was marvellously white and soft. The gawky Anaïs envied this whiteness to such an extent that she pricked her arms with needles on sewing-days.

Farewell to repose! The approach of the examinations, the honour that our possible successes would reflect on this fine new school had at last dragged our teachers from their sweet solitude. They kept us, the six candidates, in close confinement; they pestered us with endless repetitions; they forced us to listen, to remember, even to understand, making us come in an hour before the others and leave an hour after them! Nearly all of us became pale, tired and stupid; some of us lost appetite and sleep as a result of work and anxiety. I myself remained looking almost fresh, because I didn't worry overmuch and I have a matt skin. Little Luce did too; like her sister Aimée, she possesses one of those enviable, indestructible pink and white complexions. . . .

We knew that Mademoiselle Sergent was going to take us all together to the principal town of the Department and we should stay with her at the same hotel. She would take charge of all the expenses and we would settle our accounts on our return. But

for that cursed exam, we should have found this little trip enchanting.

These last days have been deplorable. Mistresses and pupils alike have been so atrociously nervy that they explode every other minute. Aimée flung her exercise-book in the face of a boarder who had made the same idiotic mistake for the third time in an arithmetic problem, then promptly fled to her own room. Little Luce was slapped by her sister and came and threw herself in my arms for me to comfort her. I hit Anaïs when she was teasing me at the wrong moment. One of the Jauberts was seized, first with a frantic burst of sobbing, then with a no less frantic attack of nerves, because, she screamed, "she would never manage to pass! . . ." (wet towels, orange-flower water, encouragements). Mademoiselle Sergent, also exasperated, made poor Marie Belhomme, who regularly forgets next day what she learnt the day before, spin round like a top in front of the blackboard.

I can only rest properly at night in the top of the big walnut-tree, on a long branch that the wind rocks . . . the wind, the darkness, the leaves. . . . Fanchette comes and joins me up there; each time I hear strong claws climbing up, with such sureness! She mews in astonishment: "What on earth are you doing up in this tree? *I'm* made to be up here, but you . . . it always shocks me a little!" Then she wanders about the little branches, all white in the blackness, and talks to the sleeping birds, ingenuously, in the hope they'll come and obligingly let themselves be eaten—why, of course!

It's the eve of our departure. No work today. We took our suitcases to school (a dress and a few underclothes; we're only staying two days).

Tomorrow morning, we all meet at half-past nine and go off in old Racalin's evil-smelling omnibus which will cart us off to the station.

It's over. We returned from the main town yesterday, triumphant all except (naturally) poor Marie Belhomme, who was

ploughed. Mademoiselle Sergent is thoroughly puffed-up over such a success. I must tell the whole story.

On the morning of our departure, we were piled into old Racalin's omnibus. He happened to be dead-drunk and drove us crazily, zigzagging from one ditch to the other, asking us if he was taking us all to be married, and congratulating himself on the masterly way he was bumping us about: "Be going ever sho eashy, bean't I . . ." while Marie uttered shrill cries and turned green with terror. At the station, they parked us in the waiting-room. Mademoiselle Sergent took our tickets and lavished tender farewells on the beloved who had come along to accompany her thus far. The beloved, in a frock of unbleached linen, and wearing a big, artless hat under which she looked fresher than a convolvulus (that bitch of an Aimée!) excited the admiration of three cigar-smoking commercial travellers who, amused at this departure of a batch of schoolgirls, had come into the waiting-room to dazzle us with their rings and their witticisms, for they found it irresistible to let out the most shocking remarks. I nudged Marie Belhomme to warn her to listen; she strained her ears but could not understand: however I couldn't draw diagrams to help her out! The gawky Anaïs understood perfectly well and wore herself out in adopting graceful attitudes and making vain efforts to blush.

The train puffed and whistled: we grabbed our suitcases and surged into a second-class carriage. It was overheated to the point of suffocation; luckily the journey only lasted three hours! I installed myself in a corner so as to be able to breathe a little and we didn't talk at all on the way, it was so entertaining to watch the landscape flying past. Little Luce, nestling beside me, slipped her arm under mine but I extricated myself, saying: "Let go, it's too hot." Yet I had on a dress of cream tussore, very straight and smocked like a baby's, clasped at the waist with a leather belt that was wider than my hand and had a square opening in front. Anaïs, brightened up by a red linen frock, looked her best; so did Marie Belhomme, who was in half-mourning, wearing mauve linen with a black flower-pattern. Luce Lan-

thenay had kept to her black uniform and wore a black hat with a red bow. The two Jauberts continued to be non-existent and drew out of their pockets some lists of questions that Mademoiselle Sergent, disdainful of this excessive zeal, made them put back again. They couldn't get over it!

Factory chimneys appeared, then scattered white houses that suddenly huddled closer together and became a crowd; the next moment, we were at the station and were getting out. Mademoiselle Sergent hustled us towards an omnibus and soon we were bumping along over grievous cobblestones, like cats' skulls, towards the Hôtel de la Poste. Idlers were strolling about the streets, which were gay with bunting, for tomorrow it was St. Someone-or-other's day—a great local feast—and the Philharmonic would be in full blast in the evening.

The manageress of the hotel, Mme. Cherbay, a fat, gushing woman who came from the same part of the country as Mademoiselle Sergent, fussed over us. There were endless staircases, then a corridor and . . . three rooms for six. That had never occurred to me! Who would they put to share with me? It's stupid; I hate sleeping with other people!

The manageress left us to ourselves, at last. We burst out chattering and asking questions; we opened our suitcases. Marie had lost the key of hers and was bewailing the fact: I sat down, tired already. Mademoiselle said ruminatively: "Let's see, I must get you fixed up. . . ." She stopped, trying to find the best way of installing us in pairs. Little Luce slid silently up to me and squeezed my hand: she hoped they would thrust us both into the same bed. The Headmistress made up her mind: "The two Jauberts, you'll sleep together. You, Claudine, with . . ." (She looked at me in a pointed way but I neither flinched nor fluttered an eyelash) ". . . with Marie Belhomme, and Anaïs with Luce Lanthénay. I think that will work out quite well." Little Luce was not at all of this opinion! She picked up her luggage with a crest-fallen look and went off sadly with the gawky Anaïs to the room opposite mine. Marie and I settled ourselves in; I tore off most of my clothes so as to wash off the dust of the train and we

wandered about ecstatically in our chemises behind the shutters that were closed because of the sun. A chemise, *that* was the only rational, practical dress!

There was singing in the courtyard. I looked out and saw the fat proprietress sitting in the shade with the hotel servants and some young men and girls; they were all bawling sentimental songs: "Manon, behold the sun!" as they made paper roses and garlands of ivy to decorate the front of the building, tomorrow. The courtyard was strewn with pine-branches; the painted iron table was loaded with bottles of beer and glasses; the earthly paradise, in fact!

Someone knocked: it was Mademoiselle Sergent. I let her come in, she didn't embarrass me. I received her in my chemise while Marie hurriedly pulled on a petticoat, out of respect. However, she didn't look as if she had noticed it, and merely told us to hurry up: luncheon was ready. We all went downstairs. Luce complained about their room; it was lit from above, they hadn't even the resource of looking out of the window!

The hotel's set luncheon was bad.

As the written exam took place next day, Mademoiselle Sergent enjoined us to go up to our rooms and make one last final revision of what we felt weakest on. What point in being here just for *that*? I'd much rather have gone to see Papa's charming friends, the Xs, who were excellent musicians. . . . She added: "If you're good, tonight you shall come down with me after dinner and we'll make roses with Madame Cherbay and her daughters." There were murmurs of joy: all my companions exulted. But not me! I felt no intoxication at the prospect of making paper roses in a hotel courtyard with that fat manageress who looked as if she were made of lard. Probably I let this be seen, for the Redhead went on, suddenly irritated:

"I'm not forcing anyone, naturally; if Mademoiselle Claudine thinks she ought not to join us . . ."

"Honestly, I *would* rather stay in my room, Mademoiselle. I'm afraid I'd be so totally useless!"

"Stay there, then, we'll do without you. But, in that case, I

fear I shall be forced to take the key of your room with me. I am responsible for you."

This detail had not occurred to me and I did not know what to reply. We went upstairs again and we yawned all the afternoon over our books, our nerves frayed with the suspense of waiting for tomorrow. It would have been much better for us to go out for a walk, for we didn't do any good, none at all. . . .

And to think that tonight I was going to be locked in! Locked in! Anything that's in the least like imprisonment makes me rabid: I lose my head as soon as I'm shut up. (When I was a child, they could never send me to boarding-school because I used to fall into swoons of rage at realising that I was forbidden to go out of the door. They tried twice when I was nine. Both times, on the very first night, I dashed to the windows like a stunned bird; I screamed, bit and scratched, then fell down unconscious. They had to set me at liberty again and I could only "stick it" at this fantastic school in Montigny because there, at least, I didn't feel "trapped" and I slept in my own bed at home.)

Certainly, I wasn't going to let the others see it, but I was sick with nervous tension and humiliation. I wasn't going to beg to be let off; she'd be far too pleased, that beastly Redhead! If she'd only leave me the key on the inside! But I wasn't going to ask her for anything at all, I didn't want to! I only prayed the night would be short. . . .

Before dinner, Mademoiselle Sergent took us for a walk along the river: little Luce, quite overcome with pity, tried to console me for my punishment:

"Listen, if you asked her to let you come downstairs, I'm sure she would, if you asked her nicely. . . ."

"Don't worry! I'd rather be triple-locked in for eight months, eight days, eight hours and eight minutes."

"You're awfully silly not to want to! We'll make roses—and we'll sing—and we'll . . ."

"Such pure pleasures! I shall pour some water on your head."

"Ssh! Be quiet! But truly, you've spoilt our day. I shan't feel a bit gay tonight, because you won't be there."

"Don't get sentimental. I shall sleep, I shall gather strength for the 'great day' tomorrow."

We dined again at the common table with commercial travelers and horse-dealers. The gawky Anaïs, obsessed with the idea of getting herself noticed, gesticulated wildly and upset her glass of wine and water over the white cloth. At nine, we went upstairs again. My companions armed themselves with little shawls against the coolness that might come later and, as for me—I went back into my room. Oh, I put a good face on it, but I listened with far from kindly feelings to the key that Mademoiselle Sergeant turned in the door and carried off in her pocket. . . . There, I was all alone. . . . Almost at once, I heard them in the courtyard. I could have had an excellent view of them from my window but not for anything in the world would I have admitted my regrets by showing any curiosity. Very well, what then? There was nothing to do but go to bed.

I had hardly taken off my belt when, suddenly, I stood stock-still before the dressing-table in front of the communicating-door that it blocked. That door opened into the neighboring room (the bolt was on my side) and the neighboring room gave on to the corridor. . . . I recognised the finger of Providence in this, it was undeniable. . . . Never mind, come what might, I didn't want the Redhead to be able to triumph and say to herself: "I shut her in!" I buckled on my belt again and put on my hat. I wasn't going to be so silly as to go into the courtyard, I was going to see Papa's friends, those charming hospitable Xs, who would give me a warm welcome. Ouf! How heavy that dressing-table was! It made me hot. The bolt was hard to push back, it needed exercise, and the door grated as it opened, but it *did* open. The room I entered, holding my candle high, was empty; there were no sheets on the bed. I ran to the door, the blessed door which was not locked and which opened angelically on to the adorable corridor. . . . How easily one breathes when one is not under lock and key! I mustn't let myself get caught! But there wasn't a soul on the stairs, not a soul at the reception-desk . . . everyone was making roses. Go on making roses, good people, go on making roses without me!

Outside, in the warm darkness, I laughed very softly; but I had to get to the Xs house. . . . The trouble was that I didn't know the way, especially at night. Pooh! I would ask. First of all, I resolutely followed the course of the river, then, under a lamp-post, I decided to ask a passing gentleman "the way to the Place du Théâtre, please?" He stopped and leant down to have a good look at me: "But, my lovely child, allow me to take you there, you'll never find it all by yourself. . . ." Botheration! I turned on my heels and fled precipitately into the shadows. At last I asked a grocer's boy, who was pulling down the iron curtain of his shop with a tremendous din, and then, after walking street after street, often pursued by a laugh or a cheeky call, I arrived in the Place du Théâtre. I rang the bell of the house I knew.

My entrance interrupted the trio for violin, 'cello and piano which two fair-haired sisters and their father were playing: they all got up excitedly: "You here? How? Why? All alone!"—"Wait, let me explain and do forgive me." I told them about my imprisonment, my escape and the Certificate tomorrow; the little fair girls laughed like mad. "Oh, that's funny! No one but you would think of such marvellous stunts!" Their Papa laughed too, indulgently: "Come along, don't be frightened. We'll take you back, we'll obtain your forgiveness." Thoroughly nice people!

So we went on making music, with no remorse. At ten o'clock, I thought I ought to go and I managed to persuade them to let only an old servant take me back. . . . Nevertheless I wondered what on earth the peppery Redhead would say to me!

The servant came into the hotel with me and I discovered that my companions were still in the courtyard, occupied in crumpling up roses and drinking beer and lemonade. I could have returned to my room unnoticed but I preferred to stage a little effect so I presented myself modestly to Mademoiselle who leapt to her feet at the sight of me. "Where did you come from?" With my chin, I indicated the servant accompanying me and she meekly produced her set speech: "Mademoiselle spent the evening at the Master's with the young ladies." Then she murmured a vague good night and vanished. I was left alone (one, two, three!) with . . . a fury! Her eyes blazed, her eyebrows knitted together till

they touched, while my stupefied classmates remained standing, their half-finished roses in their hands. From Luce's brilliant glances and Marie's scarlet cheeks and Anaïs's feverish appearance, it looked to me as if they were a little tight; of course, there was no harm in *that*. Mademoiselle Sergent did not utter a word; either she was trying to find adequate ones or else she was forcibly controlling herself so as not to explode. At last she spoke, but not to me. "Let us go upstairs, it's late." So it was in my room that she was going to burst out? Very well, then. . . . On the stairs, all the girls stared at me as if I had the plague: little Luce questioned me with her imploring eyes.

In the room, there was, at first, a portentous silence; then the Redhead interrogated me with weighty solemnity:

"Where were you?"

"You know very well . . . at the Xs . . . some friends of my father's."

"How did you dare leave your room?"

"How? You can see for yourself. I pulled out the dressing-table that barred that door."

"This is the most odious insolence! I shall inform your father of your monstrous behaviour. No doubt it will give him intense pleasure."

"Papa? He'll say: 'Good gracious, yes, that child has a passion for liberty', and he'll wait impatiently for you to finish your story so that he can eagerly bury himself again in the *Malacology of Fresnois*."

She noticed that the others were listening and turned on her heels. "Off to bed, all of you! If your candles aren't out in a quarter of an hour, you'll have me to deal with! As to Mademoiselle Claudine, she is no longer my responsibility and she can elope this very night, if she pleases!"

Oh! shocking! Really, Mademoiselle! The girls had disappeared like frightened mice and I was left alone with Marie Belhomme who declared:

"It's absolutely true that they can't shut you up! *I'd* never have had the brainwave of pulling out the dressing-table!"

"I had an anything but boring time. But do stir your stumps a little so that she doesn't come back to blow out the candle."

One sleeps badly in a strange bed and, besides, I glued myself all night against the wall so as not to brush against Marie's legs.

In the morning, they woke us up at half-past five: we got up in a state of torpor and I drenched myself in cold water to rouse myself a little. While I was splashing, Luce and the Lanky Anaïs came into borrow my scented soap, ask for a corkscrew, etc. Marie begged me to start plaiting her chignon for her. They were an amusing sight, all those little creatures, still half-asleep and wearing next to nothing.

We exchanged views on ingenious precautions to take against the examinations. Anaïs had copied out all the history dates she wasn't sure of on the corner of her handkerchief (*I should need a tablecloth!*). Marie Belhomme had contrived to make a minute atlas which could be slipped into the palm of her hand. On her white cuffs, Luce had written dates, fragments of royal reigns, arithmetic theorems—a whole manual. The Jaubert sisters had also put down quantities of useful information on strips of thin paper which they rolled up in the tubes of their penholders. They were all very anxious concerning the examiners themselves; I heard Luce say: "In arithmetic, it's Lerouge who takes the oral questions; in physics and chemistry, it's Roubaud . . . apparently he's an absolute beast; in literature, it's old Sallé . . ."

I broke in:

"Which Sallé? The one who used to be Principal of the college?"

"Yes, that's the one."

"What luck!"

I was delighted that I was to be questioned by this extremely kind old gentleman whom Papa and I knew very well; he would be good to me.

Mademoiselle Sergent appeared, concentrated and taciturn at this zero hour before battle.

"You haven't forgotten anything? Let's be off."

Our little squad crossed the bridge, mounted through various steep streets and lanes and eventually arrived in front of a battered old porch, on whose door an almost-effaced inscription proclaimed it to be the *Rivoire Institute*. It had once been the Girls' Boarding-School, but had been deserted for the past two or three years on account of its decrepitude. (Why did they park us *there*?) In the courtyard that had lost half its paving-stones, some sixty girls were chattering vivaciously, in well split-off groups; the schools didn't mix with each other. There were some from Villeneuve, from Beaulieu and from a dozen country-towns in the district; all of them clustered in little groups round their respective Headmistresses and making copious and far from charitable remarks about the other schools.

The moment we arrived, we were stared out of countenance and criticised from top to toe. I was singled out for particularly sharp scrutiny on account of my white dress with blue stripes and my big floppy lace hat which stood out against the black of the uniforms. As I smiled insolently at the candidates who were glaring at me, they turned away in the most contemptuous way imaginable. Luce and Marie flushed under the stares and shrank back into their shell; the gawky Anaïs exulted in the consciousness of being so hypercritically examined. The examiners had not arrived yet; we were merely marking time. I was getting bored. A little door without a latch yawned open on a dark corridor, lit at the far end by a luminous pane. While Mademoiselle Sergeant was exchanging icily polite remarks with her colleagues, I slipped quietly into the passage: at the end was a glass door—or the remains of one—; I lifted the rusty latch and found myself in a little square courtyard, by a shed. It was overgrown with jasmine and clematis, and there was a little wild plum-tree and all sorts of charming weeds, growing unchecked. On the ground,—admirable find!—some strawberries had ripened and smelt delicious.

I promptly decided to call the others to show them these marvels! I went back to the playground without attracting attention and I informed my companions of the existence of this unknown orchard. After nervous glances at Mademoiselle Ser-

gent who was talking to an elderly headmistress, at the door which had still not opened on the examiners (they sleep late, those chaps), Marie Belhomme, Luce Lanthénay and the lanky Anaïs made up their minds, but the Jauberts refrained. We ate the strawberries, we plundered the clematis, we shook the plum-tree; then, hearing an even louder hullabaloo in the front courtyard, we guessed that our torturers had arrived.

As fast as our legs could carry us, we dashed back along the corridor; we arrived just in time to see a file of black-clad gentlemen, by no means handsome ones, entering the ancient building in solemn silence. In their wake, we climbed the staircase, the sixty-odd of us making a noise like a squadron of cavalry. But, on the first floor, they halted us on the threshold of a deserted study-room; we had to allow their Lordships to install themselves. They sat down at a big table, mopped their brows and deliberated. What about? the advisability of allowing us to enter? But no, I was certain they were exchanging observations about the weather and chatting about their trifling affairs while we were held back with difficulty on the landing and the stairs on to which we overflowed.

Being in the front rank, I was able to observe these great men: a tall, greying one with a gentle, grandfatherly expression—kind old Sallé, twisted and gouty, with his hands like gnarled vines—a fat short one, his neck swathed in a shot-silk cravat worthy of Rabastens himself—that was Roubaud, the terrible, who would question us tomorrow in “science”.

At last, they decided to tell us to come in. We filled this ugly old room, with its indescribably dirty plaster walls, scored all over with inscriptions and pupils’ names. The tables were appalling too, scarred with pen-knives and black and purple from inkpots upset over them in former days. It was shameful to intern us in such a hovel.

One of the gentlemen proceeded to allot us our places; he held a big list in his hand and carefully mixed all the schools, separating the girls from the same district as widely as possible, so as to avoid any communication between them. (Didn’t he realise one could always convey information?) I found myself at

the end of a table, by a small girl, in mourning, with large, serious eyes. Where were my classmates? Far away, I caught sight of Luce who was sending me despairing signs and looks; Marie Belhomme was fidgeting about at a table just in front of her. They would be able to pass information to each other, those two weak vessels. . . . Roubaud was going round distributing large sheets of writing-paper, stamped in blue on the top left-hand corner, and sealing-wafers. We all understood the routine; we had to write our names in the corner, along with that of the school where we had done our studies, then to fold over this corner and seal it. (The idea was to reassure everyone about the impartiality of the criticisms.)

This little formality over, we waited for them to be kind enough to dictate something to us. I looked about me at the little unknown faces, several of which made me feel sorry for them, they were already so strained and anxious.

Everyone gave a start; Roubaud had broken the silence and spoken: "Spelling test, young ladies, be ready to take it down. I shall repeat the sentence I dictate only once."

There was a great hush of concentration. No wonder! Five-sixths of these little girls had their whole future at stake. And to think that all of those would become schoolmistresses, that they would toil from seven in the morning till five in the afternoon and tremble before a Headmistress who would be unkind most of the time, to earn seventy-five francs a month! Out of those sixty girls, forty-five were the daughters of peasants or manual labourers; in order not to work in the fields or at the loom, they had preferred to make their skins yellow and their chests hollow and deform their right shoulders. They were bravely preparing to spend three years at a Training College, getting up at five a.m. and going to bed at eight-thirty p.m. and having two hours recreation out of the twenty-four and ruining their digestions, since few stomachs survived three years of the college refectory. But at least they would wear hats and would not make clothes for other people or look after animals or draw buckets from the well, and they would despise their parents. And what was I,

Claudine, doing here? I was here because I had nothing else to do and so that, while I was undergoing the ordeal of being questioned by these professors, Papa could mess about in peace with his slugs. I was also there "for the honour of the School", to obtain one more Certificate for it, one more glory for this unique, incredible, delightful School. . . .

They had crammed this dictation with so many participles and laid so many traps of ambiguous plurals that all the sentences were so twisted and inverted that the piece ended by making no sense at all. It was puerile!

I was pretty sure I had made no mistakes; all I had to do was be careful about the accents, for they counted stray accents hovering in the wrong place over words as half-mistakes and quarter-mistakes. While I was reading it through again, a little ball of paper, very deftly aimed, landed on my exam sheet; the lanky Anaïs had written to me asking: "Should there be an s to *trouvés*, in the second sentence?" She hadn't the faintest idea, that Anaïs! Should I lie to her? No, I disdained her own usual methods. Raising my head, I signalled an imperceptible "Yes" and, calmly, she made the correction.

"You have five minutes for revision," announced the voice of Roubaud; "the handwriting test will follow."

A second and larger ball of paper arrived. I looked about me: it came from Luce whose anxious eyes were seeking mine. But . . . but she was asking for four words! If I sent back the ball, I was sure it would get pinched. I had an inspiration, a really brilliant one: I took the black leather satchel containing pencils and charcoal (the candidates had to provide everything themselves) and, using a little bit of plaster torn off the wall as chalk, I wrote down the four words that were worrying Luce. Then I suddenly lifted the satchel above my head, with its virgin side turned towards the examiners who, in any case, weren't paying much attention to us. Luce's face lit up; she made some hurried corrections: my neighbour, the girl in mourning, who had observed the scene, spoke to me:

"I say, you, aren't you frightened?"

"Not much, as you see. Got to help one another a bit."

"Yes . . . of course. Still, I wouldn't dare. You're called Claudine, aren't you?"

"Yes. How did you know?"

"Oh, you've been 'talked of' for quite a time. I'm from the school at Villeneuve; our mistresses used to say about you: 'She's an intelligent girl but as impudent as a cock-sparrow and her tomboyishness and the way she does her hair set a very bad example. All the same, if she chooses to take the trouble to exert herself, she'll be a redoubtable competitor in the exam.' You're known at Bellevue too; they say you're a bit crazy and more than a bit eccentric."

"Charming women, your teachers! But they're more interested in me than I am in them. So tell them they're only a pack of old maids who are furious because they're running to seed. Tell them that from me, will you?"

Scandalised, she said no more. Besides, Roubaud was promenading his plump little pot-belly between the tables and gathering up our papers which he carried up to the others of his species.

Then he distributed other sheets of paper to us for the handwriting test and went off to inscribe four lines on the blackboard in a "beautiful hand".

Tu t'en souviens, Cinna, tant d'heur et tant de gloirie, etc., etc. . . .

"Young ladies, you are asked to execute a line of thick cursive, one of medium cursive, one of fine cursive, one of thick round-hand, one of medium round-hand, one of fine round-hand, one of thick slanting-hand midway between round and cursive, one of medium and one of fine. You have one hour."

It was an hour of rest, that hour. The exercise was not tiring and they were not very exacting about handwriting, the round hand and the slanting suited me all right because they almost amounted to drawing; my cursive is vile; my looped letters and my capitals have considerable difficulty in keeping the prescribed

number of "bodies" and "half-bodies". Never mind! I was feeling hungry when we got to the end of the period.

We fairly flew out of that depressing, musty room into the playground to rejoin our anxious teachers who were clustered in the shade that was not even cool. Promptly there was a torrential outburst of words and questions and laments: "Did it go well? What was the subject for dictation? Did you remember the difficult phrases?"

"It was this—that—I put '*indication*' in the singular—I put it in the plural—the participle was invariable, wasn't it, Mademoiselle?—I wanted to correct it, and then, after all, I left it—such a difficult dictation! . . ."

It was past twelve and the hotel was so far away. . . .

I was yawning from starvation. Mademoiselle Sergent took us to a nearby restaurant, as our hotel was too far away to walk back there in this oppressive heat. Marie Belhomme wept and wouldn't eat, disheartened by three mistakes she had made (and every mistake took off two marks!). I told the Headmistress—who seemed to have forgotten all about my escapade of last night—our methods of communicating; she laughed over them, delighted, and merely cautioned us not to do too many rash things. During examinations, she egged us on to the worst kinds of cheating; all for the honour of the school.

While we were waiting for the period of French Composition, we were nearly all of us dozing on our chairs, overcome with heat. Mademoiselle was reading the illustrated papers and got up, after a glance at the clock: "Come along, children, we must go. . . . Try not to make yourselves out too stupid in the paper you're just going to do. And you, Claudine, if you're not marked eighteen out of twenty for French Composition, I'll throw you in the river."

"I'd be cooler there, at least!"

What dolts these examiners were! The most obtuse mind would have grasped that, in this crushing heat, we should have written more lucid French essays in the morning. But not they. Whatever were we capable of, at *this* hour?

Though full, the playground was more silent than this morning and their lordships were keeping us waiting again! I went off by myself into the walled garden: I sat down under the clematis, in the shade, and I closed my eyes, drunk with drowsiness. . . .

There were shouts and calls: "Claudine! Claudine!" I started up, only half-awake for I had been well and truly asleep, to find myself faced with Luce, looking terrified as she shook me to my feet and dragged me along with her. "But you're crazy! But you don't know what's happening! My dear, we went in a quarter of an hour ago! They've dictated the synopsis of the essay and then at last Marie Belhomme and I plucked up courage to say you weren't there . . . they looked for you . . . Mademoiselle Sergeant! out in the fields—and I thought maybe you were strolling about here. . . . My dear, you aren't half going to catch it, up there!"

I dashed up the staircase, Luce after me: a mild hullabaloo arose at my entrance and their Lordships, red from a prolonged luncheon, turned towards me:

"You had forgotten all about it, Mademoiselle? Where were you?" It was Roubaud who had spoken to me, half amiable, half thoroughly nasty.

"I was in the garden over there. I was having a siesta." A pane of the open window showed me my dim reflection; I had mauve clematis petals in my hair, leaves on my frock, a little green insect and a lady-bird on my shoulder; my hair was in wild disarray. . . . The general effect was not unattractive. . . . At least, I could only presume so, for their Lordships considered me at length and Roubaud asked me point-blank:

"You don't know a picture called *Primavera*, by Botticelli?" Aha! I was expecting that.

"Yes, I do, Sir. . . . I've been told that already."

I had cut the compliment off short and he pinched his lips with annoyance. The black-coated men laughed among themselves; I went to my place, escorted by these reassuring words mumbled by Sallé, a worthy man, although he was too shortsighted to recognise me, poor fellow: "In any case, you're not

late. Copy the synopsis written on the blackboard, your companions have not begun yet." There, there, he needn't have been frightened—I wasn't going to scold him!

Forward, French Composition! This little adventure had given me new heart.

"*Synopsis*—Develop the thoughts and comments aroused in you by these words of Chrysale: 'What matter if she fails to observe the laws of Vaugelas,' etc."

By unheard-of luck, it was not too stupid or too repellent a subject. All round me I could hear anxious and agonised questions, for most of these little girls had never heard of Chrysale nor of *Les Femmes Savantes*. They were going to make a splendid hash of it! I couldn't help laughing over it in advance. I prepared a little elucubration that wasn't too silly, adorned with various quotations to prove that one knew one's Molière tolerably well; it went quite well and I ended up by being quite oblivious to what was going on about me.

As I looked up in search of a recalcitrant word, I noticed that Roubaud was deeply absorbed in sketching my portrait in a little notebook. *I* was quite agreeable, and I resumed the pose without appearing to do so.

Paf! Yet another little ball had dropped. It was from Luce: "Can you write me one or two general ideas? I'm in a hopeless mess, I'm simply wretched. I send you a kiss from the distance." I looked at her and saw her poor little face was all blotched and her eyes red. She answered my look by a despairing shake of the head. I scribbled down everything I could for her on a bit of tracing-paper and launched the ball, not in the air—too dangerous—but along the ground in the aisle that separated the two rows of tables, and Luce deftly put her foot on it.

I titivated up my final version, developing the things that pleased *them* and displeased *me*. Ouf! Finished! I could have a look at what the others were doing. . . .

Anaïs was working without raising her head, sly and secretive, her left arm curved over her paper to prevent her neighbour from copying. Roubaud had finished his sketch and it was getting late, though the sun was almost as high as ever. I was exhausted: to-

night I would go to bed virtuously with the others, with no music. I went on observing the classroom; a whole regiment of tables in four ranks, extending right down to the end; the bent black figures of little girls of whom all one could see were smooth chignons or hanging plaits, tight as ropes; very few light dresses, only those of elementary schools like ours; the green ribbons at the necks of the boarders from Villeneuve made a splash of colour. There was a great hush, disturbed only by the faint rustle of paper being turned over or by a sigh of weariness. . . . At last, Roubaud folded up the *Fresnois Monitor*, over which he had dozed a little, and took out his watch: "Time is up, young ladies. I will collect your papers!" A few faint groans were heard; the little things who hadn't finished took fright and asked for five minutes' grace which was granted them; then the examiners collected up the fair copies and left us. We all stood up, yawning and stretching, and, before we had reached the bottom of the staircase, the groups had re-formed. Anaïs rushed up to me:

"What did you put? How did you begin?"

"You bore me stiff. . . . You don't imagine I learnt all that stuff by heart?"

"But your rough?"

"I didn't do one—only a few sentences that I licked into shape before I wrote them down."

"My dear, you'll get a terrific scolding! *I've* brought my rough out to show to Mademoiselle."

Marie Belhomme had also brought her rough out, so had all the others, including all the girls from other schools: it was always done.

In the playground, still warm from the sun that had now withdrawn from it, Mademoiselle Sergent was sitting on a little low wall, reading a novel: "Ah! Here you are at last! Your roughs, quick . . . let me see that you haven't made too many howlers."

She read them and pronounced on them: Anaïs's, it seemed, was not "devoid of merit"; Luce's "had good ideas" (mine, to be exact) "not sufficiently developed"; Marie's was "full of padding, as usual"; the Jaubert's essays were "very presentable".

"Your rough, Claudine?"

"I didn't do one."

"My dear child, you must be mad! No rough on an examination day! I give up all hope of ever getting any rational behaviour out of you. . . . Well, was your essay bad?"

"Oh no, Mademoiselle, I don't think it was bad."

"It's worth what? Seventeen?"

"Seventeen? Oh, Mademoiselle, modesty forbids me . . . seventeen, that's a lot. . . . After all, they ought to give me at least eighteen!"

My companions stared at me with envious spite. "That Claudine, she isn't half lucky to be able to foretell what marks she'll get! Let's hasten to add that it's no merit to her, she's naturally good at it and that's that; she does French essays as easily as anyone else fries eggs" . . . and so on and so on!

All about us, candidates were chattering in a shrill key, showing their roughs to their teachers, exclaiming, giving "*Ahs*" of regret at having missed out an idea . . . twittering like little birds in an aviary.

That night, instead of escaping into the town, I lay in bed, side by side with Marie Belhomme, discussing this great day with her.

"The girl on my right," Marie told me, "comes from a convent school. Just imagine, Claudine, this morning, when they were giving out the papers before Dictation, she brought a rosary out of her pocket and was saying it under the table. Yes, my dear, a rosary with huge round beads, something like a pocket abacus. It was to bring her luck."

"Pooh! If that doesn't do any good, it doesn't do any harm either. . . . What's that I hear?"

What I heard, or thought I heard, was a tremendous row in the room opposite ours, the one where Luce and Anaïs slept. The door opened violently and Luce, in a brief chemise, flung herself into the room, distracted:

"Please, *please* . . . protect me . . . Anaïs is being so *horrid*. . . ."

"What's she been doing to you?"

"First she poured water in my boots, and then, in bed, she kicked me and she pinched my thighs, and, when I complained, she told me I could sleep on the bedside mat if I wasn't satisfied!"

"Why don't you call Mademoiselle?"

"All very well, call Mademoiselle! I went to the door of her room, she wasn't there, and the girl who was going along the passage told me that she'd gone out with the manageress. . . . So now what am I going to do?"

She was crying, poor kid! She was so small in her daytime chemise that showed her slim arms and her pretty legs. Decidedly, she would be much more seductive quite naked and with her face veiled. (Two holes for the eyes, perhaps?) But this was not the moment to speculate about such matters; I jumped out of bed and ran across to the room opposite. Anaïs occupied the middle of the bed, with the blanket pulled right up to her chin: she was wearing her wickedest face.

"Look here, what's come over you? Won't you let Luce sleep with you?"

"I don't say that. Only she wants to take up all the room, so I pushed her."

"Rot! You pinched her—and you poured water in her boots."

"Sleep with her yourself, if you want to. *I'm* not keen to."

"Anyway her skin's much fresher than yours! True that's not saying much."

"Oh go on, go on. Everyone knows you're as keen on the little sister as you are on the big one!"

"You just wait, my girl. I'm about to change your ideas."

Only in my chemise as I was, I hurled myself on the bed, tore off the sheets and grabbed the lanky Anaïs by her two feet. In spite of the nails she silently dug into my shoulders, I dragged her down from the bed on her back, with her feet still in my hands and I called out: "Marie, Luce, come and look!"

A little procession of white chemises ran in on bare feet and everyone was scared. "Hi! Separate them! Call Mademoiselle!" Anaïs did not scream; she waved her legs and threw me devouring glances, desperate to hide what I was revealing as I dragged her along the floor—yellow thighs and a pear-shaped

behind. I had such a frantic desire to laugh that I was frightened I would let go of her. I explained the situation:

"The fact is that this great gawk Anaïs I'm holding doesn't want to let little Luce sleep with her, that she pinches her, that she puts water in her boots and that I want to make her keep quiet."

There was silence and a marked chill. The Jauberts were too prudent to lay the blame on either of us two. At last I let go of Anaïs's ankles and she got up, hastily pulling down her chemise.

"Into bed with you now, and try and leave this kid in peace or you'll get a thrashing that'll tan your hide."

Still silent and furious, she ran to her bed, and huddled down into it, her face to the wall. She's an incredible coward and blows are the only thing in the world she fears. While the little white ghosts were scurrying back to their rooms, Luce got timidly into bed beside her persecutor, who was now as motionless as a sack. (My protégée told me next day that Anaïs had not stirred all night, except to fling her pillow on the floor out of rage.)

No one mentioned the story to Mademoiselle Sergent. We were far too busy thinking about the day that lay before us! Arithmetic and drawing tests and, in the evening, they would put up the lists of the candidates admitted to the oral exam.

After gulping down some chocolate, we made a hurried departure. It was already warm at seven o'clock. Feeling more used to things, we took our places ourselves and we chattered, with decent moderation, while we waited for their Lordships. Already we felt more at home; we slipped ourselves in without banging ourselves between the bench and the table; we arranged our pencils, penholders, indiarubbers and scrapers in front of us with an air of being quite accustomed to doing so; it was remarkably convincing, that air. We very nearly displayed personal fads.

The masters of our destinies made their entrance. They had already lost some of their prestige; the least shy ones looked at them tranquilly, as if they knew them quite well. Roubaud, who was sporting a pseudo-panama hat in which he obviously fancied

himself very smart, became quite fidgety and said impatiently: "Come along, young ladies, come along! We're late this morning, we must make up for lost time." I liked that! So, just now, it had been our fault that they hadn't been able to get up in good time. At top speed, the tables were strewn with sheets of paper; hurriedly we sealed the corners to hide our names; hurriedly the revved-up Roubaud broke the seal of the big yellow envelope bearing the official stamp of the Examining Faculty and drew out of it the redoubtable statement of the problems:

"First Question.—A certain man bought $3\frac{1}{2}$ per cent. stock at the rate of 94 francs, 60 centimes, etc."

I longed for hail to batter through his pseudo-panama! Operations on the Bourse drive me frantic: there are brokerages of $\frac{1}{8}$ per cent. that I have all the torment in the world not to forget.

"Second Question.—The Theory of Divisibility by 9. You have one hour."

My goodness, that was none too much. Luckily I'd learnt divisibility by 9 for so long that it had finally stuck in my mind. Once again I'd have to put in order all the necessary and sufficing conditions—what a bore!

The other candidates were already absorbed and alert; a faint whispering of numbers, of muttered calculations, arose above the bent heads.

The first problem was finished. After having begun each calculation all over again twice (I so often make mistakes!) I obtained a result of 22,850 francs as the gentleman's profit: a pretty profit! I had confidence in this round and reassuring number but all the same, I wanted the support of Luce who conjures with figures in a masterly way. Several competitors had finished and I could see none but satisfied faces. In any case most of these little daughters of grasping peasants or shrewd seamstresses are gifted for arithmetic to an extent that has often amazed me. I might have asked my dark-haired next-door-neighbour, who had also finished, but I mistrusted her discreet and serious eyes, so I therefore concocted a ball, which flew off and fell under Luce's nose, bearing the figure 22,850. The child joyfully signalled me a "Yes" with her head. Satisfied, I then asked my neigh-

bour: "How much have you got?" She hesitated and murmured, with reserve: "I've over 20,000 francs."

"So've I, but how much more?"

"I told you . . . more than 20,000 francs. . . ."

"All right, I'm not asking you to lend me them! Keep your 22,850 francs, you're not the only one who's got the right result. You're like a black ant—for various reasons!"

A few girls near us laughed; my interlocutor, not even offended, folded her hands and lowered her eyes.

"Have you finished, young ladies?" bellowed Roubaud. "I restore you your liberty. Be in good time for the drawing test."

We returned at five minutes to two to the ex-Rivoire Institute. What disgust, what a desire to run away the sight of that dilapidated prison induced in me!

In the best-lit part of the classroom, Roubaud had disposed two circles of chairs; in the centre of each, a stand. What were they going to put on it? We were all eyes. The examiner-cum-factotum disappeared and returned bearing two glass jugs with handles. Before he had placed them on the stand, all the girls were whispering: "My dear, it's going to be frightfully difficult, because of being transparent!"

Roubaud announced:

"Young ladies, for the drawing test, you are at liberty to sit where you choose. Reproduce these two utensils (utensil yourself!) in line, the sketch in charcoal, the finished outline in drawing-pencil. You are strictly forbidden to use a ruler or anything whatever that resembles one. The sheets of cardboard that you should all have brought with you will serve you as drawing-boards."

He had not finished speaking before I had already flung myself into the chair I had my eye on, an excellent place from which one saw the jug in profile, with the handle at the side. Several followed my example and I found myself between Luce and Marie Belhomme. "Strictly forbidden to use a ruler for the lines of construction?" Nonsense, everyone knew what *that* meant! My companions and I had in reserve strips of stiff paper

a decimetre long and marked off in centimetres, very easy to conceal.

We had permission to talk, but we made little use of it; we preferred to make grimaces, arm outstretched and one eye shut, in order to take measurements with the charcoal-holder. With a little dexterity, nothing was simpler than to draw the construction-lines with a ruler (two strokes which divided the sheet cross-wise and a rectangle to enclose the belly of the jug).

From the other circle of chairs came a sudden small commotion, stifled exclamations and Roubaud's severe voice: "It wouldn't need more than that, Mademoiselle, to have yourself excluded from the examination!" It was a wretched girl, a skimpy, puny little thing, who had got caught, ruler in hand, and was now sobbing into her handkerchief. Roubaud became extremely nosy and examined us at close quarters, but the marked strips of paper had disappeared as if by magic. In any case, we didn't need them any more.

My jug was coming on beautifully, with a well-curved belly. While I was complacently considering it, our invigilator, distracted by the timid entry of the school-mistresses who had come to find out "if the French composition had been good on the whole," left us alone, Luce gave me a gentle tug: "*Do* tell me if my drawing's all right; it looks to me as if something's wrong with it."

After examining it, I explained to her:

"Why, of course—it's got the handle too low. It makes it look like a whipped dog that's tucking its tail in."

"What about mine?" asked Marie from the other side.

"*Yours* is hunchbacked on the right side: put an orthopedic corset on it."

"A what?"

"I'm telling you you ought to put some cotton wool on the left, it's only got 'advantages' on one side. Ask Anaïs to lend you one of her false bosoms." (For the lanky Anaïs inserts two handkerchiefs in the gussets of her stays and all our gibes haven't succeeded in making her decide to give up this childish padding.)

This back-chat threw my neighbours into a state of uncon-

trollable gaiety. Luce flung herself back in her chair, exposing all the fresh teeth in her little cat-like jaw as she laughed. Marie blew out her cheeks like the bellows of a bagpipe. Then suddenly they both stopped, petrified in the midst of their joy—for the terrible pair of blazing eyes belonging to Mademoiselle Sergent had cast a Medusa look at them from the far end of the room. And the session was concluded in irreproachable silence.

They put us out, feverish and noisy at the thought that, this very evening, we should read, on a big list nailed to the door, the names of the candidates who had qualified for the Orals next day. Mademoiselle Sergent had difficulty in restraining us: we were making an intolerable noise chattering.

"Are you coming to look at the names, Marie?"

"Gracious, no! If I wasn't on it, the others would jeer at me."

"*I'm* coming," said Anaïs. "I want to see the faces of those who haven't qualified."

"And suppose you were one of them yourself?"

"All right then, I don't have my name written on my forehead. I'd know how to put on a beaming expression so that the others wouldn't look pitying."

"That's enough! You're bursting my eardrums," said Mademoiselle Sergent sharply. "You'll see what you'll see—and take care I don't come alone, this evening, to read the names on the door. To begin with, we're not going back to the hotel; I've no desire to make that trek twice more; we'll dine at the restaurant."

She asked for a private room. In the species of bathroom they allotted to us, where the light fell drearily from above, our effervescence petered out. We ate like so many little wolves, without saying a word. Our hunger appeased, we took it in turn to ask, every ten minutes, what time it was. Mademoiselle tried vainly to calm our jangled nerves by assuring us there were too many entrants for their Lordships to have been able to read all the essays before nine o'clock; we went on seething all the same.

We did not know what to do with ourselves in this cellar! Mademoiselle Sergent would not take us out of doors; I knew

why: the garrison was off duty at that hour and the red-trousered soldiers, out to cut a dash, did not stand on ceremony. Already, on the way to dinner, our little band had run the gauntlet of smiles, tongue-clickings and the sound of blown kisses; these manifestations had exasperated the Headmistress who had machine-gunned these audacious infantrymen with her scowls, but it would have needed more than that to reduce them to order!

The declining day, and our impatience, made us peevish and ill-natured; Anaïs and Marie had already exchanged spiteful remarks, their feathers ruffled like two fighting hens; the two Jauberts appeared to be meditating on the ruins of Carthage and I had thrust little Luce away with a sharp elbow when she wanted to be cuddled. Luckily, Mademoiselle, whose nerves were almost as much on edge as ours, rang, and asked for some light and two packs of cards. Good idea!

The brightness of the two gas-jets restored our morale a little and the packs of cards made us smile.

"I say, let's play *trente-et-un*!"

"Come on, then!"

The two Jauberts did not know how to play! All right, they could go on reflecting on the frailty of human destiny; we others were going to play cards while Mademoiselle read the papers.

We had quite fun. We played badly and Anaïs cheated. And, every now and then, we stopped in the middle of a game, our elbows on the table and our faces strained, to ask: "Whatever time is it?"

Marie gave vent to the opinion that, as it was dark, we shouldn't be able to read the names; we should have to take matches with us.

"Silly, there'll be street-lamps."

"So there will! . . . But suppose that, just in that very place, there wasn't one?"

"All right," I said very low, "I'll steal a candle from the candlesticks on the mantelpiece and you bring the matches. . . . Let's go on playing. . . . Knave of Clubs and two aces!"

Mademoiselle Sergent draw out her watch; we did not take our eyes off her. She stood up; we followed her example so abruptly

that chairs fell over. All our excitement surged up again, we danced over to get our hats, and, while I was looking in the glass to put mine on, I pinched a candle.

Mademoiselle Sergent put herself to unheard-of trouble to prevent us from running; passers-by laughed at this swarm of girls which was forcing itself not to gallop and we laughed back at the passers-by. At last, the door glittered before our eyes. When I say glittered, I am using the word in a literary way . . . for, after all, there actually wasn't a lamp-post! In front of that closed door, a crowd of agitated shadows was screaming, jumping for joy or lamenting; they were our competitors from the other schools. Sudden, brief match-flares, soon extinguished, and flickering candle-flames lit up a great white sheet pinned to the door.

Nothing would stop us: we dashed forward, brutally shoving away the small, milling silhouettes; no one paid the least attention to us.

Holding the stolen candle as straight as I could, I read and divined, guided by the initials in alphabetical order: "Anaïs, Belhomme, Claudine, Jaubert, Lanthénay." All of us! All! What joy! And now came the verifying of the number of marks. The minimum of marks required was 45; the total was written beside the names, the detailed marks between two brackets. Mademoiselle Sergent, in ecstasy, transcribed into her notebook: "Anaïs 65, Claudine 68—what did the Jauberts get? 63 and 64, Luce 49, Marie Belhomme 44½. What? 44½? But you've not qualified then? Whatever's this you're telling me?"

"No, Mademoiselle," said Luce, who had just gone up to verify. "It's 44¾ . . . she's qualified with a quarter of a mark short . . . by a special favour of those gentlemen."

Poor Marie, quite out of breath from the terrible fright she had just had, gave a long sigh of relief. It was decent of those chaps to have overlooked her quarter of a mark but I was afraid she would make a mess of the Oral. Anaïs, once her first joy was over, charitably held up a light for the new arrivals, while spattering them with melted wax, horrid girl!

Mademoiselle could not calm us, not even by dousing us with the cold water of this sinister prediction: "You're not at the

end of your troubles yet. I should like to see your faces tomorrow night after the Oral."

With difficulty she got us back to the hotel, skipping about and singing in the moonlight.

And later on, when the Headmistress was in bed and asleep, we got out of our beds and danced, Anaïs, Luce, Marie and I (not the Jauberts, of course). We danced wildly, our hair flying, holding out our brief chemises as if for a minuet.

Then, at a fancied noise from the direction of the room where Mademoiselle reposed, the dancers of this unseemly quadrille fled with suppressed giggles and a rustling of bare feet.

The next morning, waking up too early, I ran in to "scare the life out of" the Anaïs-Luce couple which was sleeping in an absorbed, conscientious way. I tickled Luce's nose with my hair; she sneezed before she opened her eyes and her dismay woke Anaïs who grumbled and sat up, cursing me. I exclaimed, with immense seriousness: "But don't you know what time it is? Seven o'clock, my dear, and the Oral's at half-past." I let them hurl themselves out of bed and put on their stockings and I waited till they'd buttoned up their boots before telling them it was only six, that I'd seen it wrong. This didn't annoy them as much as I'd hoped.

At a quarter to seven, Mademoiselle hustled us, hurried us over our chocolate, insisted on our casting a glance through our history summaries while we ate our slices of bread-and-butter and finally pushed us out into the sunlit street, completely dazed. Luce was armed with her pencilled cuffs, Marie with her tube of rolled-up paper, Anaïs with her miniature atlas. They clung to these little life-saving planks even more than yesterday for today they had to talk; talk to their Lordships whom they did not know; talk in front of thirty pairs of malicious little ears. Anaïs was the only one who looked cheerful; she did not know the meaning of intimidation.

In the dilapidated courtyard, there were far fewer candidates today; so many had fallen by the wayside between the written

exam and the oral! (That was good; when they admit a lot to the written, they turn down a lot for the oral.) Nearly all of them looked pale, yawned nervously and complained, like Marie Belhomme, of a tight feeling in their stomachs . . . that disturbing stage-fright!

The door opened to admit the black-garbed men: we followed them silently to the room upstairs, stripped today of all its chairs. In each of the four corners, behind black tables (or rather, tables that had once been black) an examiner seated himself, solemn, almost lugubrious. While we were taking in this stage-setting, feeling both curious and fearful, as we stood massed in the doorway, embarrassed by the vast space we had to cross, Mademoiselle gave us a push: "Go on! Go on, for goodness' sake! Are you going to take root here?" Our group advanced more boldly, in a bunch: old Sallé, gnarled and shrivelled, stared at us without seeing us, he was so incredibly short-sighted; Roubaud was playing with his watch-chain, his eyes abstracted; the elderly Lerouge was waiting patiently and consulting the list of names; and, in the embrasure of a window, a fat lady, Mademoiselle Michelet, was enthroned, with sol-fa charts in front of her. I nearly forgot another one, the bad-tempered Lacroix, who was grumbling and furiously shrugging his shoulders as he turned over the pages of his books and seemed to be having a fierce argument with himself; the girls, terrified, were telling each other he must be "an absolute beast"! *He* was the one who made up his mind to growl out a name: "Mademoiselle Aubert!"

The said Aubert, an overgrown girl, limp and stooping, started like a horse, squinted and promptly became stupid. In her desire to do the right thing, she bounded forward, shouting in trumpet-like tones, and with a strong peasant accent: "But here I be, Surr!" We all burst out laughing and that laugh we hadn't thought of repressing raised our spirits and cheered us up.

That bulldog of a Lacroix had frowned when the unfortunate girl had bellowed her "But here I be!" of distress and had replied: "Who's denying it?" As a result, she was in a pitiable state.

"Mademoiselle Vigoureux!" called Roubaud. *He* was taking

the alphabet by the tail. A plump little thing hurried forward; she wore the white hat, wreathed in daisies, of the Villeneuve school.

"Mademoiselle Mariblom!" barked old Sallé, who thought he was taking the middle of the alphabet and was reading it all wrong. Marie Belhomme advanced, crimson, and seated herself on the chair opposite old Sallé; he stared at her and asked her if she knew what the Iliad was. Luce, just behind me, sighed: "At least, she's begun—the great thing is to begin!"

The unoccupied competitors, of whom I was one, dispersed shyly, scattered themselves about the room and went to listen to their colleagues sitting on the stool of repentance. I myself went off to the examination of the Aubert girl to give myself a little entertainment. At the moment I approached, old Lacroix was asking her: "So you don't know who married Philip the Handsome?"

Her eyes were starting out of her head and her face was red and glistening with sweat; her mittens revealed fingers like sausages: "He married . . . no, he didn't marry . . . Surr, Surr," she cried all of a sudden, "I've forgotten. Everything!" She was trembling; big tears rolled down her cheeks. Lacroix looked at her, vicious as the plague: "You've forgotten everything? With what remains, you get a nice zero."

"Yes, yes," she stammered. "But it doesn't matter, I'd rather go off back home, I don't care. . . ."

They took her away, hiccuping with great sobs. Through the window, I heard her outside, telling her mortified teacher: "Honest I'd rather look after Dad's cows, so I would. And I'll never come back here, I won't. An' I'll take the two o'clock train, so I will."

In the classroom, her schoolmates were discussing the "regrettable incident", grave and disapproving. "My dear, can you imagine her being so idiotic! My dear, if they'd asked me a question as easy as that, I'd have been only too pleased, my dear!"

"Mademoiselle Claudine!"

It was old Lerouge who was asking for me! Ugh! Arithmetic.

. . . Luckily he looked like a kindly Papa. . . . I saw at once that he wouldn't do me any harm.

"Let's see, my child, now could you tell me something about right-angled triangles?"

"Yes, sir, though, actually, I don't much care for them."

"Now, now! You make them out worse than they are. Let's see, construct me a right-angled triangle on this blackboard, and then you'll give it its dimensions and then you'll talk to me nicely about the square on the hypotenuse. . . ."

One would have to be pretty determined, to get oneself ploughed by a man like that! So I was as meek as a lamb with a pink ribbon round its neck and I said everything I knew. Actually, it didn't take long.

"But you're getting along splendidly. Tell me, as well, how one recognises that a number is divisible by 9, and I'll let you off any more."

I rattled off: "sum of the digits . . . necessary condition . . . adequate condition."

"You can go, my child, that's enough."

I stood up with a sigh of relief and found Luce behind me. She said: "You're lucky, I'm so glad you were." She said it charmingly: for the first time, I stroked her neck without laughing at her. Goodness! It was me again! One hadn't time to breathe!

It was the porcupine, Lacroix; things were getting hot! I installed myself; he looked at me over the top of his eye-glasses and said: "Ha! What was the War of the Two Roses?" After the names of the leaders of the two factions, I stopped dead.

"And then? And then? And then?"

He irritated me. I burst out:

"And then, they fought like ragamuffins for a long time, but that hasn't stuck in my memory."

He stared at me, amazed. I'd get something thrown at my head in a moment!

"Is that how you learn history, my good girl?"

"Pure chauvinism, Sir. I'm only interested in the history of France."

Incredible luck: he laughed!

"I'd rather deal with impertinent girls than stupefied ones. Tell me about Louis XV (1742)."

"All right. That was the period when Madame de la Tournelle was exercising a deplorable influence over him. . . ."

"Good heavens! You're not being asked about that!"

"Excuse me, Sir, it's not my own invention, it's the simple truth . . . the best historians . . ."

"What d'you mean? the best historians . . ."

"Yes, Sir, I read it in Michelet—with full details!"

"Michelet! but this is madness! Michelet, get this into your head, wrote a historical novel in twenty volumes and he dared to call that the *History of France*! And you come here and talk to me of Michelet!"

He was excited, he banged on the table, but I stood up to him. The young candidates round us stood transfixed, not believing their ears; Mademoiselle Sergent had approached, gasping, ready to intervene. . . . When she heard me declare:

"Anyway, Michelet's less boring than Duruy! . . ."

She flung herself against the table and protested in anguish:

"Sir, I implore you forgive . . . this child has lost her head: she will withdraw at once. . . ."

He interrupted her, mopped his brow and panted:

"Let her alone, Mademoiselle, there's no harm done. I hold to my own opinions, but I'm all in favour of others holding to theirs. This young person has false ideas and bad reading-habits, but she is not lacking in personality—one sees so many dull ones!—Only you, my peruser of Michelet, try and tell me how you would go, by boat, from Amiens to Marseilles or I'll chuck you a 2 that will give you a painful surprise!"

"Leaving Amiens by embarking on the Somme, I go up . . . etc., etc., . . . canals . . . etc., and I arrive at Marseilles only after a period varying between six months and two years."

"That isn't *your* business. Mountain-system of Russia, and step lively."

Alas, I cannot say that I shine outstandingly in the knowledge of the mountain-system of Russia, but I got through it more or

less except for some gaps which seemed regrettable to the examiner.

"And the Balkans . . . you're cutting them out, then?"

That man spat out his words like a fire-cracker.

"Certainly not, Sir, I was keeping them as a final titbit."

"That's all right. Be off with you."

People drew back rather indignantly to let me through. Those dear little pets!

I relaxed; no one had summoned me, so I listened with horror to Marie Belhomme who was answering Roubaud that "to prepare sulphuric acid, you pour water on lime and then that begins to boil; then you collect the gas in a balloon-flask." She wore the expression that always meant enormous howlers and boundless stupidities; her huge, long, narrow hands gripped the table; her eyes, like those of a brainless bird, rolled and glittered; she poured out monstrous ineptitudes with extreme volubility. There was nothing to be done; even if one had whispered in her ear, she wouldn't have heard! Anaïs was listening to her too and enjoying herself with all her kindly soul. I asked her:

"What have you got through, already?"

"Singing, history, joggraphy."

"Nasty old Lacroix?"

"Yes. What a swine! But he asked me easy ones, Thirty Years' War, the Treaties . . . I say, Marie's off the rails!"

"Off the rails seems to me putting it mildly."

Little Luce, excited and astounded, came up to us:

"I've passed joggraphy, and history, I answered well. . . . Oh, I *am* bucked!"

"Hullo, twirp! I'm going to have a drink at the pump, I can't hold out any longer. Anyone comin' too?"

Not one of them was; either they weren't thirsty or they were afraid of missing a summons. Downstairs, in a kind of parlour, I found the Aubert girl, her cheeks still blotched with red from her recent despair and her eyes swollen. She was writing to her family, at a little table, calm now and pleased to be going back to the farm. I said to her:

"Look here, didn't you *want* to know anything just now?"

She raised her calf's eyes.

"Makes me frightened, all that do, and gets me in ever such a state, it do. Mother sent me to boarding-school, father he didn't want it, he said I'd do best looking after the house like my sisters, and doing the washing and digging the garden. Mother, she didn't want it—it was her as they listened to. They made me ill, trying to make me learn—and you see how I come over today. I said as it would happen! Now they'll have to believe me!"

And she went on tranquilly writing her letter.

Upstairs, in the classroom it was hot enough to kill one. The girls, nearly all red and shiny (lucky I haven't any tendency to redness!), were scared and tense, straining their ears to hear their names called and obsessed with the idea of not making stupid answers. Wouldn't it soon be twelve o'clock so that we could go?

Anaïs returned from physics and chemistry; *she* wasn't red, how could she be red? I believe that, even in a boiling cauldron, she would remain yellow and cold.

"Well, everything all right?"

"Thank goodness, I've finished. You know Roubaud's taking English into the bargain: he made me read sentences and translate; I don't know why he squirmed when I read in English . . . isn't he idiotic?"

It was the pronunciation! Bother! It was pretty obvious now that Mademoiselle Aimée Lanthénay, who gave the lessons, did not speak English with excessive purity. And, as a result, any moment now that imbecile of a Professor was going to make fun of me because *I* didn't pronounce better! Still another delightful episode! I was enraged to think that idiot was going to laugh at me.

Midday at last. Their Lordships rose and we proceeded to the usual shindy of our departure. Lacroix, his hair bristling and his eyes starting out of his head, announced that the merry little party would begin again at 2:30. Mademoiselle sorted us out with

difficulty from the swirling tide of chattering young things and took us off to the restaurant. She was still stiff with me on account of my "odious" conduct with old Lacroix; but I didn't care! The heat weighed down on me; I was tired and mute. . . .

Oh, the woods, the dear woods of Montigny! At that very hour, how well I knew how they hummed! The wasps and flies that tipped in the flowers of the limes and the elders made the whole forest vibrate like an organ; and the birds did not sing, for, at midday, they perched upright on the branches, seeking the shade, preening their feathers and peering into the undergrowth with bright, shifting eyes. I would be lying at the edge of the Fir Plantation from which I could see the whole town down there below me with the warm wind in my face, half dead with well-being and laziness.

. . . Luce saw me far away, completely in another world, and tugged my sleeve, giving me her most fetching smile. Mademoiselle was reading the papers; my classmates were exchanging sleepy scraps of conversation. I complained and Luce protested gently:

"And you never talk to me any more, either! All day we're passing exams, in the evening we go to bed and at meals you're in such a bad temper that I don't know when to find you any more!"

"Perfectly simple! Don't look for me!"

"Oh, that's not a bit nice of you! You don't even notice all my patience in waiting for you, the way I put up with your always pushing me away. . . ."

The gawky Anaïs laughed like a door that needed oiling and the little thing stopped, highly intimidated. All the same it is true that she has unshakable patience. And to think that so much constancy won't avail her in the least; sad! sad!

Anaïs was pursuing an idea of her own: she had not forgotten Marie Belhomme's incoherent answers and, amiable bitch, she kindly asked the poor wretch who was sitting dazed and motionless:

"What question did they ask you in physics and chemistry?"

"It's of no importance," growled Mademoiselle crossly. "Whatever they asked her, she'll have given nonsensical answers."

"I can't remember now," said poor, flummoxed Marie. "Sulphuric acid, I think. . . ."

"And what did you say?"

"Oh, luckily I knew a bit, Mademoiselle; I said that you poured water on lime and that the bubbles of gas that form were sulphuric acid. . . ."

"You said that?" articulated Mademoiselle, gritting her teeth as if she were longing to bite. . . .

Anaïs gnawed her nails with delight. Marie, thunderstruck, did not utter another word and the Headmistress, rigid and red in the face, marched us off, walking very fast. We trotted behind her like little dogs, practically hanging our tongues out under the sun that beat down on us.

We no longer paid the least attention to our alien competitors and they did not look at us either. The heat and our jangled nerves had taken away all desire to show off and all animosity. The girls from the Villeneuve High School, the "apple-greens" as we called them—because of the green ribbons round their necks, that appalling harsh green which is the special prerogative of boarding-schools—still put on prudish, disgusted airs when they came anywhere near us (why? we shall never know); but everyone was settling down and relaxing. Already we were thinking about our departure tomorrow morning and brooding deliciously on how we'd rile our rejected schoolmates, the ones who hadn't been able to enter on account of "general weakness". How the gawky Anaïs was going to preen and strut and talk about the Training College as if she owned it! Pooh! I hadn't enough shoulders to shrug.

The examiners reappeared at last; they were mopping their faces and looked ugly and shiny. Heavens, I should hate to be married in weather like this! The mere idea of sleeping with a man who was as hot as they were. . . . (In any case, in summer, I should have two beds. . . .) Moreover, the smell in that overheated room was appalling; it was obvious that a great many of

those little girls were anything but fastidious about their underclothes. I would have done anything to get away.

I collapsed on a chair and vaguely listened to the others as I awaited my turn; I saw the girl, the luckiest one of all, who had "finished" first. She had endured all the questioning; now she could breathe again as she crossed the room to the accompaniment of compliments, envious glances and cries of "You're jolly lucky!" Soon another one followed her and joined her in the playground where the "released" were resting and exchanging their impressions.

Old Sallé, slightly unbent by this sun which warmed his gout and his rheumatics, was taking a forced rest as the girl he was waiting for was occupied elsewhere. Suppose I risked a tentative assault on his virtue? Very quietly, I went up and sat down on the chair opposite him.

"Good morning, Monsieur Sallé."

He stared at me, settled his glasses, blinked—and still did not recognise me.

"Claudine, you know?"

"Ah . . . fancy that! Good morning, my dear child! Is your father well?"

"Very well, thank you."

"Well now, how's the exam going? Are you satisfied? Will you soon be finished?"

"Alas, I'd like to be! But I've still got to get through physics and chemistry, literature—which is your department—English and music. Is Madame Sallé well?"

"My wife's gadding about in Poitou; she'd do much better to be looking after me but . . ."

"Listen, Monsieur Sallé, now you've got me here, do get me over the literature."

"But I haven't got to your name, not nearly! Come back a little later on. . . ."

"Monsieur Sallé, whatever would it matter?"

"Matter? It would matter that I was enjoying a moment's respite and that I had thoroughly deserved it. And besides, it's not in the programme; we mustn't break the alphabetical order."

"Monsieur Sallé, be a dear. You need hardly ask me anything. You know that I know much more than the syllabus demands about books that count as literature. I'm a book-worm in Papa's library."

"Er . . . yes, that's true. I can certainly do that for you. I had intended to ask you what were the bards and the troubadours and the *Roman de la Rose*, and so on."

"You can set your mind at rest, Monsieur Sallé. The troubadours, I know all about *them*. I always see them in the person of the little Florentine Singer, like this . . ."

I stood up and struck the pose; my body leaning forward on the right leg and old Sallé's green umbrella doing duty as a mandolin. Luckily we were quite alone in that corner! Luce stared at me from the distance and gaped with surprise. Poor gouty old man, it amused him a little and he laughed.

"And they wore a velvet cap and curly hair, very often even a piebald costume (in blue and yellow, it looks particularly well); their mandolin hung on a silken cord and they sang that little thing out of the *Passer-By*: 'My sweet one, April's here.' That, Monsieur Sallé, is how *I* see the troubadours. We have also the First Empire troubadour."

"My child, you're a little crazy but I find you refreshing. Just Heaven! What on earth can you possibly call troubadours of the First Empire? Speak very low, my little Claudine—if their Lordships saw us . . ."

"Ssh. The First Empire troubadours, I knew all about them from the songs Papa used to sing. Listen carefully."

I hummed very softly:

"Burning with love, setting forth to the wars,
His helm on his head and his lyre in his hand,
A troubadour sings to the maid he adores,
Looking his last on his dear native land:

 'My country, she calls me,
 My sweetheart enthrals me,
For love and for glory, I'd gladly be slain,
Such is the troubadour's merry refrain?" "

Old Sallé roared with laughter:

"Good Lord, how absurd those people were! Of course I know we shall be just as absurd in twenty years' time, but that idea of a troubadour with a helmet and a lyre! . . . Run away quick, child, you'll get a good mark; kind regards to your father, tell him I'm devoted to him and that he teaches his daughter fine songs!"

"Thank you, Monsieur Sallé, good-bye. Thank you again for not asking me any questions. I won't say a word—don't worry!"

What a thoroughly nice man! This had slightly restored my courage and I looked so cheerful that Luce asked me:

"Did you answer well, then? What did he ask you? Why did you take his umbrella?"

"Ah! I'll tell you! He asked me very difficult things about the troubadours, about the shape of the instruments they used; lucky I happened to know all those details!"

"The shape of the instruments . . . no, honest, I shudder at the thought he might have asked me that! The shape of the . . . but it's not in the syllabus! I shall tell Mademoiselle!"

"Right, we'll make a formal complaint. Have *you* finished?"

"Yes, thanks! I've finished. I've got a hundred pounds weight off my chest, I assure you! I think there's only Marie left to go through it now."

"Mademoiselle Claudine!" said a voice behind us. Aha! It was Roubaud. I sat down in front of him, decorous and reserved. He assumed a pleasant manner—he is the most polished of the local professors—and I talked back, but he still had a grudge against me, vindictive creature, for having too hastily brushed aside his Botticellian compliment. It was in a slightly peevish voice that he asked me:

"You haven't fallen asleep under the leaves today, Mademoiselle?"

"Is that a question that forms part of the programme, Monsieur?"

He gave a slight cough. I had made a shocking blunder to vex him. Well, it couldn't be helped:

"Kindly tell me how you would set about procuring yourself ink."

"Good heavens, Sir, there are lots of ways: the simplest would be just to go and ask for some at the stationer's on the corner. . . ."

"A pleasant joke, but not enough to obtain you lavish marks. . . . Will you try and tell me what ingredients you would use to fabricate ink?"

"Nut gall . . . tannin . . . iron monoxide . . . gum . . ."

"You don't know the proportions?"

"No."

"Pity! Can you tell me something about mica?"

"I've never seen it anywhere except in the little panes in the doors of stoves."

"Really? Once more, a pity! The lead in pencils, what is it made of?"

"Graphite, a soft stone that is cut into thin rods and enclosed between two halves of a wooden cylinder."

"Is that the only use of graphite?"

"I don't know any others."

"As usual, what a pity! Only pencils are made with it?"

"Yes, but a great many are made; there are some mines in Russia, I think. People consume a fabulous quantity throughout the entire world, especially examiners who sketch portraits of candidates in their notebooks. . . ."

(He blushed and fidgeted.)

"We will pass on to English."

Opening a little collection of Miss Edgeworth's *Tales*, he said:

"Please translate a few sentences for me."

"Translate, yes, but read . . . that's another matter!"

"Why?"

"Because our English mistress pronounces it in a ridiculous way. And I don't know how to pronounce it otherwise."

"Pooh! What does that matter?"

"It matters that I don't like making a fool of myself."

"Read a little, I'll pull you up at once."

I read but in a very low voice, hardly articulating the syllables

and I translated the sentences before I had uttered the last words. Roubaud burst out laughing, in spite of himself, at such eagerness not to display my deficiency in English and I felt like scratching his face. As if it were my fault!

"Good. Will you give me some instances of irregular verbs, with their form in the present tense and in the past participle?"

"To see, I saw, seen. To be, I was, been. To drink, I drank, drunk. To . . ."

"That's enough, thank you. Good luck, Mademoiselle."

"Too kind of you, Sir."

I discovered the next day that that hypocrite had given me extremely bad marks, three below the average, so that I would have been ploughed if my marks for written work, especially for French Composition hadn't pleaded in my favour. Beware of these underhand men in pretentious neckties who stroke their moustaches and pencil your portrait while giving you surreptitious looks! It was true that I had annoyed him, but the fact remains that straightforward bulldogs like old Lacroix are worth a hundred of him!

Delivered from physics and chemistry as well as English, I sat down and busied myself with making my disordered hair look slightly more artistic. Luce made a bee-line for me and obligingly rolled my curls round her finger, kittenish and cuddling as usual! She certainly had courage, in a temperature like that!

"Where are the others, baby?"

"The others? Oh, they've all finished, they're down in the playground with Mademoiselle. And all the girls from the other schools who've finished are down there too."

The room was, in fact, rapidly emptying.

That fat kind Mademoiselle Michelet summoned me at last. She was red and exhausted enough to make Anaïs herself feel sorry for her. I sat down; she studied me with big, puzzled, good-natured eyes, without saying a word.

"You are . . . musical, Mademoiselle Sergent told me."

"Yes, Mademoiselle, I play the piano."

She threw up her arms and exclaimed:

"Then you know much more about it than I do."

It was a cry from the heart; I couldn't help laughing.

"Dear me, now! Listen . . . I'm going to make you read at sight and that'll be all. I'll find you something difficult, you'll get through it without any trouble."

The "something difficult" she found was a fairly simple exercise which, being all in semiquavers, with seven flats in the key-signature, had seemed to her "black" and redoubtable. I sang it *allegro vivace*, surrounded by a circle of admiring little girls who sighed with envy. Mademoiselle Michelet nodded her head, and, without further insistence, awarded me a 20 which made the audience turn green.

Ouf! So it was actually over! Soon I would be back in Montigny; I would return to school, (run about the woods, watch the frolics of our instructresses (poor little Aimée, she must be languishing, all by herself!)). I tore down to the playground; Mademoiselle Sergent was only waiting for me and stood up as soon as she saw me.

"Well! Is it all over?"

"Yes, thank the Lord! I've got twenty for music."

"Twenty for music!"

My companions shouted the words in chorus, unable to believe their ears.

"It only needed that—that you should *not* have got twenty for music," said Mademoiselle, with an air of detachment, but secretly flattered.

"All the same," said Anaïs, annoyed and jealous, "twenty for music, nineteen for French Composition . . . if you've got a lot of marks like those!"

"Don't worry, sweet child, the elegant Roubaud will have marked me extremely stingily!"

"Because?" inquired Mademoiselle, promptly uneasy.

"Because I didn't have much to say to him. He asked me what wood they made flutes out of, no, pencils, something of that sort, and then something or other about ink . . . and about Botticelli. . . . Quite frankly, the two of us didn't 'click'."

The Headmistress's brow darkened again.

"I should have been extremely surprised if you *hadn't* done something idiotic! You'll have no one but yourself to blame if you fail."

"Alas, who knows? I shall blame it on Monsieur Antonin Rabastens—he has inspired me with a violent passion and my studies have suffered deplorably as a result."

At this, Marie Belhomme clasped her midwife's hands and declared that, if she had a lover, she would not say it so brazenly. Anaïs looked at me out of the corner of her eye to find out if I were joking or not, and Mademoiselle, shrugging her shoulders, took us back to the hotel, lagging and dropping behind and dawdling so much that she invariably had to wait for someone at every turning. We had dinner; we yawned. At nine o'clock we were smitten again with the fever of going to read the names of the elect on the gates of that ugly Paradise. "I shan't take any of you," declared Mademoiselle, "I shall go alone and you will wait here." But there arose such a concert of groans that she relented and let us come.

Once again we took candles as a precaution, but this time they were not needed; a benevolent hand had hung a big lantern over the white notice on which our names were inscribed . . . there, I'm going a little too fast in saying "our" . . . suppose mine wasn't to be found in the list? Anaïs would have fainted from joy! Luckily in the midst of exclamations, shoves from behind and much clapping of hands, I read out: Anaïs, Claudine, etc., . . . All of us, in fact! Alas, no, not Marie: "Marie's failed," murmured Luce. "Marie's not on it," whispered Anaïs, hiding her malicious delight with considerable difficulty.

Poor Marie Belhomme remained rooted to the spot, her face quite white, in front of the cruel sheet which she studied with her glittering, birdlike eyes huge and round: then the corners of her mouth pulled down and she burst into noisy tears. . . . Mademoiselle took her away, annoyed; we followed, without giving a thought to the passers-by who looked back. Marie was moaning and sobbing out loud.

"Come, come, little girl," said Mademoiselle. "You're being unreasonable. You can try again in October, you'll have better

luck. . . . Why think, that gives you two more months to work in. . . ."

"Oh, oh!" wailed the other, inconsolable.

"You'll pass, I tell you! Look, I promise you that you'll pass! Now are you satisfied?"

This affirmation did, indeed, have a happy result. Marie no longer did more than give little grunts, like a month-old puppy when you stop it from sucking the teat, and walked along dabbing her eyes.

Her handkerchief was wringing wet and she ingenuously wrung it out as we walked over the bridge. That bitch of an Anaïs said in an undertone: "The papers announce a high rise in the river Lisse." Marie, who had heard, burst into uncontrollable laughter mixed with the remains of sobs, and we all laughed wildly too. And, in a flash, the unstable head of the ploughed candidate had veered round to joy, like a weathercock; she thought how she was going to pass in October and became positively gay. And nothing seemed more appropriate to us, that heavy, sultry night, than to take a skipping-rope and skip in the square (all of us, yes, even the Jauberts!) up till ten o'clock under the moon.

The next morning, Mademoiselle had already come round and shaken us in our beds at six o'clock, though the train didn't leave till ten! "Get up, get up, you little ticks; you've got to pack your things and have your breakfast, you'll have none too much time!" She was throbbing with violent trepidation, her sharp eyes gleamed and sparkled; she hustled Luce who was staggering with sleep and pommelled Marie Belhomme who, in her nightdress and slippers, was rubbing her eyes without regaining any clear consciousness of the everyday world. *We* were all utterly exhausted but who would have recognized in Mademoiselle the duenna who had chaperoned us these last three days? Happiness transfigured her; she was going to see her little Aimée again. From sheer joy, she kept smiling beatifically at nothing in the omnibus that took us back to the station. Marie seemed a little melancholy about her failure, but I think it was out of duty that she put on a contrite expression. And we chattered wildly, all at

once, each one telling the story of her exam to five others who were not listening.

"Old thing!" screeched Anaïs. "When I heard that he was asking me the dates of the . . ."

"I've forbidden you a hundred times to call each other 'old thing'," broke in Mademoiselle.

"Old thing," went on Anaïs under her breath, "I only just had time to open my little notebook in my hand; the most terrific thing is that he saw it—cross my heart he did—and he didn't say a word!"

"Oh, you liar of liars!" cried the honest Marie Belhomme, her eyes starting out of her head, "I was there, I was watching, he didn't see anything at all—he'd have taken it away from you . . . they certainly took the ruler away from one of the Villeneuve girls. . . ."

"You'd better keep your mouth shut! Or run' along and tell Roubaud that the Dog's Grotto is full of sulphuric acid!"

Marie hung her head, turned red and began to cry again at the remembrance of her misfortunes. I made the gesture of opening an umbrella and Mademoiselle once more emerged from her "delicious anticipation":

"Anaïs, you're a pest! If you torment one single one of your companions, I'll make you travel alone in a separate compartment."

"The smoking compartment, naturally," I observed.

"*You* were not being asked your opinion. Pick up your bags and wraps, don't stand there like stuffed dummies!"

Once in the train, she paid no more attention to us than if we did not exist; Luce went to sleep, with her head on my shoulder; the Jauberts became absorbed in the contemplation of the fields that slipped past and of the white and dappled sky; Anaïs bit her nails; Marie declined into a doze, along with her affliction.

At Bresles, the last station before Montigny, we began to fidget a little; ten minutes more and we should be there. Mademoiselle pulled out her little pocket-mirror and verified the set of her hat, the disorder of her rough frizzy red hair, the cruel

crimson of her lips. Absorbed and palpitating with excitement, her expression was almost demented. Anaïs pinched her cheeks in the wild hope of bringing a faint touch of red to them; I put on my immense, riotous hat. For whom were we taking so much pains? Not for Mademoiselle Aimée, certainly, in the case of us small fry. . . . Oh, well! for no one, for the station officials, for the omnibus-driver, old Racalin, a sixty-year-old drunkard, for the half-wit who sold the papers, for the dogs who would be trotting along the road.

There was the Fir Plantation, and the Bel Air wood, and then the common, and the goods station; then, at long last, the brakes squeaked! We jumped out behind Mademoiselle who had already rushed to her little Aimée, who was hopping gaily about on the platform. She had crushed her in such a fierce embrace that the frail assistant-mistress had suddenly turned red, stifled by it. We ran up to her and welcomed her in the manner of good little schoolgirls: “. . . ‘morning, Mmm-selle! . . . H’are you, Mmm-selle?”

As it was fine and we were in no hurry, we stuffed our suitcases into the omnibus and returned on foot, strolling the whole way between the high hedges where milkwort blossomed, blue and winey pink, and *Ave Marias* with their flowers like little white crosses. Happy to be off the leash, to have no French History to revise or maps to colour, we ran in front of and behind those ladies who walked arm-in-arm, close together and keeping in perfect step. Aimée had kissed her sister and given her a tap on the cheek, saying: “There, you see now, little canary-bird, one gets through somehow, in spite of everything!” And, after that, she had only eyes and ears for her tall friend.

Disappointed once again, poor Luce attached herself to my person and followed me like a shadow, muttering jeers and threats: “It’s truly worth while splitting one’s head to get compliments like that! . . . What a couple of guys those two look; my sister hanging on the other like a basket! . . . In front of all the people going by, it’s enough to make you weep!” They couldn’t have cared less about the people going by.

Triumphal return! Everyone knew not only where we came

from but the results of the examination which Mademoiselle had telegraphed: people were standing in their doorways and made friendly signs to us. . . . Marie felt her distress increasing and effaced herself as much as possible.

The fact of having left the School for a few days made us see it more clearly on returning to it. It was finished, perfect to the last detail, white and spotless. The Town Hall stood in the middle, flanked by the two schools, boys' and girls'; there lay the big playground, whose cedars they had mercifully spared, with its small, formal, typically French clumps of shrubs, and the heavy iron gates—far too heavy and too redoubtable—that shut us in. There stood the water-closets with six compartments, three for the big girls, three for the little ones (in a touching concession to modesty, the big girls' lavatories had full doors and the little ones' half-doors); upstairs were the handsome dormitories whose shining window-panes and white curtains were visible from outside. The unfortunate ratepayers would be paying for it for years to come. Anyone might think it was a barracks, it was so handsome!

The girls gave us a noisy welcome. Since Mademoiselle Aimée had kindly confided the supervision of her own pupils and that of the First Class to the chlorotic Mademoiselle Griset during her little trip to the station, the classrooms were strewn with papers, and littered with sabots that had been used as missiles and the cores of wind-fallen apples. . . . At a frown from Mademoiselle Sergent, everything was restored to order; creeping hands picked up the apple-cores and feet stretched out and silently resumed possession of the scattered sabots.

My stomach was crying out and I went off to lunch, delighted to see Fanchette again, and the garden, and Papa; my white Fanchette, who had been baking herself and growing thinner in the sunshine, welcomed me with sharp, surprised mews; the green garden, neglected and overgrown with plants which had strained upward and grown immensely tall to find the sunlight the great trees hid from them; and Papa who welcomed me with a hearty, affectionate slap in the hollow under my shoulder:

"What on earth's become of you? I never see you these days!"

"But, Papa, I've just come back from passing my exam."

"What exam?"

I assure you there is no one like him! Obliging, I recounted to him the adventures of the last few days, while he tugged his great red and white beard. He seemed pleased. No doubt, his experiments in cross-breeding slugs had furnished him with unhopèd-for results.

I allowed myself four or five days of rest and of wandering over to the matignons where I found Claire, my co-First Communicant, dripping with tears because her lover had just left Montigny without even deigning to inform her. In a week she will possess another fiancé who will leave her at the end of three months; she is not cunning enough to hold the boys and not practical enough to get herself married. And, as she obstinately insists on remaining virtuous, this may go on for a long time.

Meanwhile, she was looking after her twenty-five sheep, a slightly comic-opera, slightly absurd little shepherdess, with the big mushroom hat that protected her complexion and her chignon (the sun fades one's hair, my dear!), her tiny blue apron embroidered in white, and the white novel, with its title *En Fête!* lettered in red, that she concealed in her basket. (It was I who had lent her the works of Auguste Germain to initiate her into Life! Alas, maybe I shall be responsible for all the appalling errors she'll commit.) I was convinced that she found herself poetically unhappy—a pathetic, deserted fiancée—and that, when she was by herself, she delighted in assuming nostalgic poses, "her arms dropped, like useless weapons", or her head bowed, half-buried under her dishevelled hair. While she was telling me the meagre news of the past four days, along with her misfortunes, it was I who kept an eye on the sheep and urged the bitch after them: "Fetch them, Lisette! Fetch them over there!" and I who uttered the warning "Prrr . . . my beauty!" to stop them from touching the oats: I'm used to it.

"When I found out what train he was leaving by," sighed Claire, "I arranged to leave my sheep with Lisette and I went down to the level crossing. At the barrier, I waited for the train—

it doesn't go too fast there because it's uphill. I saw him, I waved my handkerchief, I blew him kisses, I *think* he saw me. . . . Listen, I'm not certain, but it looked to me as if his eyes were red. Perhaps his parents forced him to come back home. . . . Perhaps he'll write to me. . . ."

Keep it up, romantic little thing, hope costs nothing. If I tried to dissuade you, you wouldn't believe me.

After five days of loafing about the woods, scratching my arms and legs on brambles, bringing home armfuls of wild pinks, corn-flowers and campions, and eating bitter wild cherries and gooseberries, curiosity seized me again and I felt a homesick longing for the School. So I went back to it again.

I found them all—that is the big ones—sitting on benches in the shade, working lazily at "exhibition pieces"; the little ones, under the covered-in part, were in process of splashing each other at the pump; Mademoiselle was in a wicker armchair, her Aimée at her feet on an inverted flower-box, lounging and whispering. At my arrival, Mademoiselle Sergent started and swung round in her seat.

"Ah, there you are! That's lucky! You've certainly taken your time! Mademoiselle Claudine runs wild in the fields without giving a thought to the fact that the prize-giving is approaching and that the pupils don't know a note of the part-song they're supposed to be singing at it!"

"But . . . isn't Mademoiselle Aimée a singing teacher then? Isn't Monsieur Rabastens (Antonin) one either?"

"Don't talk nonsense! You know perfectly well that Mademoiselle Lanthénay can't sing, her voice is too delicate to permit her to. As to Monsieur Rabastens, apparently they've been gossiping in the town about his visits and his singing lessons. Good heavens, what a filthy hole this is for tittle-tattle! The long and short of it is, he won't be coming back. We can't do without you for the part-songs and you take advantage of the fact. This afternoon, at four o'clock, we will divide up the parts and you will copy out the verses on the blackboard."

"I'm perfectly willing. What's the song this year?"

"The *Hymn to Nature*. Marie, go and get it—it's on my desk. Claudine is going to begin to din it in to you."

It was a chorus in three parts, the typical kind of thing that schoolgirls sing. The sopranos twittered earnestly:

O'er the distant fields they ring,
As the morning hymn they sing,
Echoing sweetly to the sky. . . .

Meanwhile, the mezzos, echoing the rhymes in "ing", repeat "ding, ding, ding" to imitate the Angelus bell. The audience would love it.

So that delightful life was about to begin; a life consisting in shouting myself hoarse, in singing the same tune three hundred times over, in returning home voiceless, in losing my temper with those little girls who were congenitally lacking in the faintest sense of rhythm. If at least they gave me a present for doing all this!

Anaïs, Luce and a few others luckily had a good aural memory and, after the third repetition, could follow me with their voices. We stopped because Mademoiselle said: "Enough for today"—it would have been too cruel to make us sing for long in that African temperature.

"And, one other thing," added Mademoiselle. "It's forbidden to hum the *Hymn to Nature* between lessons. Otherwise you'll murder it, you'll distort it out of all knowledge and you'll be incapable of singing it properly at the prizegiving. Get on with your needlework now and don't let me hear you talking too loud."

They kept us big ones out-of-doors so that we could execute in greater comfort the marvellous pieces of needlecraft destined for the exhibition of *hand work*! (Could these works be done in any way except "by hand"? I don't know of any "foot work".) For, after the distribution of prizes, the entire town would come and admire the display of our work. Two classrooms would be filled with samples of lace, tapestry and beribboned lingerie laid out on the study-tables. The walls would be hung with

open-work curtains, crochet bedspreads mounted on coloured linings, bedside rugs of green wool moss (in brushed-up knitting) dotted with imitation red and pink flowers, also in wool, and with chimney-piece borders in embroidered plush. . . . These grown-up little girls liked the underclothes they displayed to be glamorous, so their main exhibits consisted of sumptuous pieces of lingerie—batiste chemises embroidered with tiny flowers, with marvellous yokes; frilly drawers gartered with ribbons; camisoles scalloped top and bottom—all displayed over linings of red, blue and mauve paper with labels on which the maker's name was inscribed in beautiful round handwriting. All along the walls were ranged stools worked in cross-stitch on which reposed either the horrible cat whose eyes were made of four green stitches with a black one in the middle or the dog with the crimson back and the purplish paws, from whose mouth lolled a turkey-red tongue.

Obviously it was the underclothes that principally interested the boys who came, like everyone else, to see the exhibition. They lingered over the flowered chemises and the beribboned knickers, nudged each other, laughed and whispered monstrous comments.

It is only fair to say that the Boys' School boasted its own exhibition, rivalling our own. If they did not offer exciting lingerie for public admiration, they displayed other marvels; cleverly-turned table-legs, twisted columns (my dear! they're the most difficult of all), samples of woodwork in "dovetailing", cardboard boxes dripping with glue, and, above all, clay models—the joy of the Headmaster who modestly christens this room "*Sculpture Section*"—models which claim to reproduce the friezes of the Parthenon and other bas-reliefs but are all blurred, bloated and pitiable. The *Drawing Section* is no more consoling: the heads of the Brigands of the Abruzzi squint, the King of Rome has a boil, Nero grimaces horribly, and President Loubet in a tricolour frame (woodwork and paste-board combined) obviously wants to be sick (because he's thinking about his minister, explains Dutertre, still furious at not being a Deputy). On the walls, grubby wash-drawings, architectural plans and the "antici-

pated (*sic*) general view of the Exhibition of 1900"—a water-colour which deserves the prize of honour.

So, during the time that still separates us from the holidays, we shall leave all our books on the shelf, we shall work lazily in the shade of the walls, incessantly washing our hands—a pretext to go for a stroll—so as not to stain light wools and white fabrics—with damp fingers. All I am exhibiting is three pink lawn chemises, cut like a baby's, with matching knickers—closed ones. This last detail scandalises my companions who unanimously find it "indecent"—on my word of honour!

I installed myself between Luce and Anaïs who herself was sitting next to Marie Belhomme for, from force of habit, we keep together in a little group. Poor Marie! She had to work again for the exam in October. . . . Since she was fretting to death in the classroom, Mademoiselle took pity on her and let her come with us; she sat there reading Atlases and Histories of France; when I say "reading"—her book was open on her knees, she bent her head and glanced sideways in our direction, straining her ears to catch everything we said. I could foresee the result of the October exam!

"I'm parched with thirst! Have you got your bottle?" Anaïs asked me.

"No, didn't think of bringing it, but Marie's sure to have hers."

Still another of our immutable, absurd customs, those bottles. As soon as the weather turned really hot, it was agreed that the water in the pump became undrinkable (it is at any season), and each one brought along a bottle of some cool drink at the bottom of her little basket—sometimes in her leather satchel or her canvas bag. There was great rivalry as to who could produce the most fantastic mixture and the most unnatural liquid. No cocoa, that was for the baby class! For us water mixed with vinegar which blanches the lips and gnaws at the stomach; acid lemonades; mint drinks, confected oneself with the fresh leaves of the plant; brandy, pinched from home and thickened with sugar; the astringent juice of green gooseberries that made one's mouth

water. The lanky Anaïs bitterly deplored the departure of the chemist's daughter who at one time used to provide us with bottles of spirits of peppermint diluted with far too little water, or sometimes with a patent concoction called eau de Botot. I myself, being a simple nature, confined myself to drinking white wine with a dash of Seltzer water, sugar and a little lemon. Anaïs indulged too freely in vinegar and Marie in extract of liquorice, so concentrated that it was almost black.

As the use of bottles was forbidden, each one, I repeat, brought her own, stoppered with a cork through which was thrust a quill. This arrangement allowed us to drink, by bending forward on the pretext of picking up a cotton-reel, without displacing the bottle lying in its basket, its beak sticking out. At the little quarter-of-an-hour recreation (at half-past nine and half-past three), everyone rushed to the pump to pour water over the bottles and cool them a little. Three years ago, a little girl fell down with her bottle and blinded herself in one eye; her eye is all white now. After this accident, they confiscated all the receptacles, every single one, for the space of a week . . . then, someone brought hers back, an example followed by someone else the next day . . . and, a month later, the bottles were functioning regularly again. Perhaps Mademoiselle did not know of this accident which happened long before her arrival—or else she preferred to shut her eyes so that we should leave her in peace.

Nothing has been happening, to tell the truth. The heat has taken away all our high spirits. Luce besieges me less with her importunate caresses; inclinations to quarrel hardly arise before they die down at once; it is general slackness, of course, and the sudden storms of July that catch us unawares in the playground and sweep us away under tremendous downpours of hail.—An hour later, the sky is cloudless.

We played a wicked joke on Marie Belhomme, who had boasted of coming to school without any drawers on, on account of the heat.

There were four of us, one afternoon, sitting on a bench in the following order:

Marie—Anaïs—Luce—Claudine.

After having had my plan duly explained to them in undertones, my two neighbours got up to wash their hands and the middle of the bench remained empty, leaving Marie at one end and me at the other. She was half asleep over her arithmetic. I got up suddenly; the bench tipped over: Marie, startled awake, fell, her legs in the air, with one of those squawks like a slaughtered hen which are her personal speciality, and showed us . . . that she was, indeed, wearing no drawers. There was an outburst of howls and tremendous laughs; the Headmistress wanted to lecture us but could not, being in fits of laughter herself. Aimée Lanthénay preferred to take herself off so as not to present her pupils with the sight of herself writhing like a poisoned cat.

Dutertre had not been here for ages. He was said to be at some bathing-resort where he was basking in the sun and flirting (but where did he get the money?). I could just see him in white flannels, wearing belts that were too broad and shoes that were too yellow; he adores those rather flashy get-ups. He would look very much of a flashy adventurer himself in those light colours—his face too sun-tanned and his eyes too bright—with his pointed teeth and his black moustache that has a rusty look as if it has been singed. I have never given another thought to his sudden attack in the glass-paned corridor; the impression had been sharp, but short—and besides, with him, one knows perfectly well that it means nothing! I am probably the three hundredth little girl he has tried to lure to his house; the incident is of no interest either to him or to me. It would have been if the attempt had succeeded, that's all.

Already, we were giving a great deal of thought to what we should wear for the prizegiving. Mademoiselle was getting herself a black silk dress embroidered by her mother, an exquisite needlewoman, who was working a design all over it, in satin-stitch; a pattern of big bunches of flowers and slender garlands that ran round the hem of the skirt and branches that climbed over the bodice—all in subtle, muted shades of violet silk. It was

an extremely distinguished affair, a little "old-ladyish" perhaps, but impeccably cut. Always dressed in dark, simple things, the chic of our Headmistress's clothes eclipses all the lawyers' and tax-collectors' and shopkeepers' and retired businessmen's wives' in the place! It is her little revenge—the revenge of an ugly woman with an excellent figure.

Mademoiselle Sergent was also concerned about dressing her little Aimée charmingly for this great day. They had ordered samples of stuff from the Louvre and the Bon Marché and the two friends, deeply absorbed, made their selection together in our presence, in the playground where we sat working in the shade. I thought that this was going to be a dress that would not cost Mademoiselle Aimée much; really, she would be very wrong to act otherwise. It was not with her seventy-five francs a month—from which she had to deduct thirty francs for her board (which she did not pay), another thirty for her sister's (which she saved) and twenty francs she sent to her parents, as I knew from Luce—it was not, I declare, with these emoluments that she would pay for the charming dress of white mohair of which I had seen the pattern.

Among the schoolgirls, it was very much the thing not to seem in the least concerned about what one was going to wear for the prizegiving. All of them were brooding over it a month in advance and tormenting their Mammias to be allowed ribbons or lace or at least alterations which would bring last year's dress up to date—but it was considered good taste to say nothing about it. We asked each other with detached curiosity, as if out of politeness: "What's your dress going to be like?" And we appeared hardly to listen to the answer, made in the same off-hand, contemptuous tone.

The gawky Anaïs had asked me the routine question, her eyes elsewhere and her face vacant. With an absent-minded look, and sounding quite indifferent, I explained: "Oh, nothing startling . . . white muslin . . . a crossed fichu on the bodice, with the neck cut down to a point . . . and Louis XV sleeves with a muslin frill, stopping at the elbows. . . . That's all."

We were always all in white for the prizegiving, but the dresses

were trimmed with light ribbons; these rosettes, bows and sashes whose colour, which we insisted on changing every year, greatly preoccupied us.

"The ribbons?" inquired Anaïs in an artificial manner. (I had been expecting that.)

"White too."

"My dear, a real bride then! You know, lots of them are going to look as black in all that white as fleas on a sheet."

"True. Luckily, white suits me quite well."

(Fume, dear child! Everyone knows that with your yellow skin, you're forced to put red ribbons or orange ones on your white frock so as not to look like a lemon.)

"What about you? Orange ribbons?"

"Goodness, no! I had *them* last year! Louis XV ribbons, striped, in two materials, faille and satin, ivory and scarlet. My dress is cream wool."

"Me," announced Marie Belhomme, who had not been asked anything. "It's white muslin with periwinkle-blue ribbons, a mauvey blue, awfully pretty!"

"Me," said Luce, as usual, nestling in my skirts or crouched in my shadow, "I've got the dress, only I don't know what ribbons to put on it; Aimée would like them blue. . . ."

"Blue? Your sister's a dolt, saving the respect I owe her. With green eyes like yours, one doesn't choose blue ribbons—that sets one's teeth on edge. The hatshop in the square sells very pretty ribbons, in green and white glacé . . . your dress is white?"

"Yes . . . white muslin."

"Good! Now, bully your sister into buying you green ribbons."

"No need to, I'm the one who's buying them."

"Better still. You'll see, you'll look charming; there won't be three who'll dare risk green ribbons, they're too difficult to wear."

That poor kid! At the least kind thing I say to her without meaning to, her face lights up. . . .

Mademoiselle Sergent, in whom the forthcoming exhibition

inspired certain anxieties, hustled us and hurried us up; it snowed punishments, punishments that consisted in doing twenty centimetres of lace, a metre of hem or twenty rows of knitting after class. She herself was working, too, at a pair of magnificent muslin curtains which she embroidered very prettily indeed when her Aimée left her time to. That charming sluggard of an Assistant, lazy as a cat as she is, sighed and yawned over fifty tapestry stitches, in front of all the pupils and Mademoiselle told her, without daring to scold her, that "it was a deplorable example to us." Whereupon the *insubordinate* tossed her work in the air, looked at her friend with sparkling eyes and flung herself on her, nibbling her hands. The big ones smiled and nudged each other; the little ones did not raise an eyebrow.

A large paper, bearing the seal of the Prefecture and the stamp of the Town Hall, which Mademoiselle found in the letter-box, has greatly disturbed this morning which happens, for once, to be cool. All heads are busy about it—and all tongues. The Headmistress unfolded it; read it; re-read it, and said nothing. Her giddy little companion, impatient at not being in the know, snatched it with lively, insistent paws and uttered such loud cries of "Ah!"s and "That's going to cause a lot of fuss" that we were violently intrigued and positively palpitating.

"Yes," Mademoiselle said to her, "I was told about it, but I was waiting for the official confirmation; he's a friend of Doctor Dutertre's. . . ."

"But that's not all. You must tell the school, because they're going to hang out the flags, they're going to have illuminations, they're going to have a banquet. . . . Just look at them, they're sizzling with impatience!"

Sizzling? Weren't we just!

"Yes, we must announce it to them. . . . Young ladies, try and listen to me and to take in what I say! The Minister of Agriculture, Monsieur Jean Dupuy, is coming to the main town on the occasion of the forthcoming Agricultural Show, and he will take advantage of this to come and officially open the new schools: the town will be decorated with flags and bunting and

illuminated; there will be a reception at the station . . . and now I'm bored with you all—you'll soon know all about it because the town-crier will announce it. Only try and 'get a move on' more than you're doing at the moment so that your samples of work will be ready."

Profound silence. And then babel broke loose! Ejaculations burst out, everyone talked at once and the tumult grew, pierced by a shrill little voice: "Is the Minister going to ask us questions?"

We howled down Marie Belhomme, the duffer who had asked that.

Mademoiselle made us get into line, although it wasn't time yet, and left us screeching and chattering while she went off to sort out her ideas and make arrangements in view of the unheard-of event which was brewing.

"Old thing, what have *you* got to say about that?" Anaïs asked me in the street.

"I say that our holidays will begin a week earlier. That's no joy to me. I'm bored stiff when I can't come to school."

"But there's going to be celebrations and balls and fun and games in the square."

"Yes, and heaps of people to parade in front of, I know just what's in your mind! You know, we shall be very much in the public eye. Dutertre, who's an intimate friend of the new Minister (it's because of him that this newly-fledged Excellency's risking himself in a hole like Montigny), will put us forward. . . ."

"No! D'you really think so?"

"Definitely! It's a plot he's hatched to get the Deputy pushed out!"

She went off radiant, dreaming of official celebrations during which ten thousand pairs of eyes would contemplate her admiringly!

The town-crier had announced the news: we were promised endless joys; arrival of the ministerial train at nine o'clock; the

municipal authorities, the pupils of the two Schools, in fact every most outstanding member of the population of Montigny would await the Minister near the station, at the entrance to the town and would conduct him through the decorated streets to the bosom of the Schools. There, on a platform, he would speak! And in the great reception-room of the Town Hall he would banquet, along with a numerous company. After that, distribution of prizes to grown-up people (for Monsieur Jean Dupuy was bringing along a few little green and purple ribbons for those to whom Dutertre was under an obligation—a master-stroke the latter had brought off). In the evening, a great ball in the banqueting room. The brass band of the principal town of the district (something very special!) would graciously lend its assistance. Finally the Mayor invited the inhabitants to hang out flags and bunting on their dwellings and to decorate them with greenery. Ouf! What an honour for us!

This morning, in class, Mademoiselle solemnly announced to us—we saw at once that great things were brewing—the visit of her dear Dutertre who would give us, with his customary obligingness, ample details about the way in which the ceremony was to be ordered.

Whereupon, he did not come.

It was only in the afternoon, just before four o'clock, at the moment when we were folding away our lace and knitting and tapestry-work into our little baskets that Dutertre arrived, as usual, like a whirlwind, without knocking. I had not seen him since his "attempt"; he had not changed. He was dressed with his usual carefully thought-out negligence—coloured shirt, almost white jacket and trousers, a big, light-coloured, sailor-knotted tie tucked into the cummerbund that served him as a waistcoat. Mademoiselle Sergent, like Anaïs, like Luce, like Aimée Lanthénay, like all of them, found his taste in clothes supremely distinguished.

While he was talking to those ladies, he let his eyes wander in my direction, long eyes, tilting up at the outer corners—the

eyes of a vicious animal, which he knew how to make gentle. He won't catch me again letting him take me out into the corridor; those days are over!

"Well, little ones," he exclaimed. "You're pleased to be seeing a Minister?"

We answered in vague, respectful murmurs.

"Attention! You're going to give him an elegant reception at the station, all in white! That's not all, you must offer him bouquets, three of the big ones, one of whom will recite a little compliment; yes, definitely!"

We exchanged looks of feigned shyness and untruthful fright.

"Don't behave like little geese! There must be one in pure white, one in white with blue ribbons, one in white with red ribbons, to symbolise a flag of honour. Eh! Eh! not a bad little flag at all! You're in it, of course, in the flag, you (that was *me*) . . . you're decorative and besides I want you to be seen. What are your ribbons for the prize-giving like?"

"As it happens, this year, I'm white all over."

"That's fine, you little virginal type, you'll be the middle of the flag. And you'll recite a speech to my friend the Minister. He won't be bored looking at you, you know!"

(He was completely crazy to let out things like that here! Mademoiselle Sergent would kill me!)

"Who's got red ribbons?"

"Me!" shrieked Anaïs who was palpitating with hope.

"Right, you then. I'm quite agreeable."

It was a half-lie on the part of Anaïs, who was determined at all costs to be in the picture, since her ribbons were striped.

"Who's got blue ones?"

"Me, S-sir," stammered Marie Belhomme, choking with terror.

"That's fine, you won't make a repulsive trio. By the way, about the ribbons, don't spoil the ship for a ha'porth of tar, let yourselves go, I'm doing the paying! (Hum!) Magnificent sashes, fine dashing bows—and I'm buying you bouquets to match your colours!"

"So far ahead!" I observed. "They'll have plenty of time to get faded."

"Be quiet, you little hoyden, you'll never develop the bump of reverence. I like to think you've already developed two others more pleasantly situated?"

The entire class burst into enthusiastic giggles; Mademoiselle gave a sickly smile. As to Dutertre, I could have sworn he was drunk.

They threw us out before he left. I was bombarded with cries of: "My dear, there's no denying it, you're always the lucky one!" "All the honours for you, as usual!" "It wouldn't have been anyone else, no fear!" I did not answer a word but went off to comfort poor little Luce who was heartbroken at not having been chosen as one of the flag. "There, there, green will suit you better than anything. . . . And, besides, it's your own fault. Why didn't you put yourself forward like Anaïs?"

"Oh," sighed the little thing, "it doesn't matter. I lose my head in front of lots of people and I should have done something silly. But I'm glad that you're reciting the compliment and not that great gawk Anaïs."

Papa, when informed of the glorious part I was to play in the opening of the Schools, wrinkled his Bourbon nose and inquired:

"Ye gods! Am I going to have to show myself over there?"

"Certainly not, Papa. You remain in the shadow!"

"Then you really mean I haven't got to bother about you?"

"Really and truly not, Papa. Don't change your usual ways!"

The town and the School are upside down. If it goes on like this, I shall no longer have time to describe anything in my diary. This morning we were in class by seven o'clock, though class was hardly the word! The Headmistress had had enormous parcels of tissue-paper sent over from the main town; pink, pastel blue, red, yellow and white. In the central classroom, we gutted the parcels—the biggest girls were constituted chief assistants—and off we went, counting the huge flimsy sheets, folding them in six lengthwise, cutting them into six strips and tying these strips in little bundles which were carried to Mademoiselle's

desk. She scalloped them along the edges with pinking-shears, then Mademoiselle Aimée distributed them to the entire First Class and the entire Second Class. Nothing to the Third; those kids were too little—they would ruin the paper, the pretty paper of which every strip would become a crumpled, bloated rose at the end of a wire stalk.

We lived in a state of ecstasy! Text-books and exercise-books slept in closed desks and it was a question of who could get up first and rush off at once to the School, now transformed into a florist's workroom.

I no longer lingered lazily in bed and I was in such a hurry to get there in good time that I fastened my belt in the street. Sometimes we were all assembled in the classrooms already when their Ladyships came down at last. They were taking things easy too, in the matter of costume! Mademoiselle Sergent displayed herself in a red cotton dressing-gown (without any corsets, proudly); her winsome assistant followed her, in bedroom slippers, her eyes sleepy and tender. The atmosphere has become completely homely; the day before yesterday, Mademoiselle Aimée, having washed her hair, appeared in the morning with her hair down and still damp. Her golden hair was as fine as silk, rather short and curling softly at the ends; she looked like a scamp of a little page and her Headmistress, her kind Headmistress, devoured her with her eyes.

The playground was deserted; the drawn serge curtains enveloped us in a blue, fantastic twilight. We made ourselves comfortable; Anaïs left off her apron and turned up her sleeves like a pastry-cook; little Luce, who hopped and ran behind me all day long, had pulled up her dress and her petticoat like a washerwoman, a pretext for displaying her rounded calves and slender ankles. Mademoiselle, moved to pity, had allowed Marie Belhomme to shut away her books. Wearing a linen blouse with black and white stripes and looking, as usual, rather like a Pierrot, she flapped around with us, cutting the strips crooked, making mistakes, catching her feet in the wire, in utter despair or swooning with joy all in the same minute, but so gentle and inoffensive that we didn't even tease her.

Mademoiselle Sergent stood up and, with a brusque gesture, drew the curtain on the side that overlooked the boys' playground. We could hear, from the school opposite, the braying of harsh, badly-pitched young voices; it was Monsieur Rabastens teaching his pupils a Republican song. Mademoiselle waited a moment or two, then waved her arm. The obliging Antonin promptly came running up, bareheaded, with a La France rose adorning his buttonhole.

"Would you be kind enough to send two of your boys over to the workshop and make them cut this brass-wire into lengths of twenty-five centimetres?"

"Right away, Mademoiselle! Are you still working at your flowers?"

"We shan't be finished for a long time; it needs five thousand roses for the school alone and we're also commissioned to decorate the banqueting room!"

Rabastens went off, running bareheaded under the ferocious sun. A quarter of an hour later, there was a knock on our door which opened to admit two big boobies of fourteen or fifteen, bringing back the lengths of wire. Not knowing what to do with their lanky bodies, they stood there, red-faced and stupid, excited to find themselves in the midst of fifty little girls who, bare-necked and bare-armed, with their bodices undone, laughed mischievously at the two boys. Anaïs brushed against them in passing, I gently stuffed serpentine trails of paper into their pockets; they escaped at last, both pleased and sorry, while Mademoiselle was prodigal of "Shs's" to which we paid scant attention.

Along with Anaïs, I was a folder and cutter; Luce tied up the bundles and carried them to the Headmistress; Marie put them in a heap. At eleven in the morning, we left everything and formed into a group to rehearse the *Hymn to Nature*. Towards five o'clock, we smartened ourselves up a little; tiny mirrors emerged from pockets; some smaller fry of the Second Class obligingly stretched their black aprons behind the panes of an open window and, in front of this sombre looking-glass,

we put on our hats again, I fluffed up my curls, Anaïs pinned up her collapsing chignon, and we went off home.

The town was beginning to be as stirred-up as we were; just think, Monsieur Jean Dupuy was arriving in six days' time! The boys went off in the morning in carts, singing at the top of their lungs and whipping the sorry steed in the shafts with all their might. They went out into the municipal wood—and into private woods too, I'm quite sure—to choose their trees and mark them; firs in particular, elms and velvety-leaved aspens would perish in hundreds; at all costs, honour must be done to this newly-made Minister! In the evening, in the square and on the pavements, the girls crumpled paper roses and sang to attract the boys to come and help them. Good heavens, how they must speed the task! I could see them from here, going at it with both hands!

Carpenters removed the mobile screens from the great room in the Town Hall where the banquet was to be held; a huge platform sprouted in the courtyard. The district Doctor-Superintendent Dutertre made brief and frequent appearances, approved everything that was being built, slapped the men on the back, chucked the women under the chin, stood drinks all round and disappeared, soon to return. Happy countryside! During this time, the woods were ravaged, poaching went on day and night, there were brawls in the taverns and a cow-girl at Chêne-Fendu gave her newborn child to the pigs to eat. (After a few days, they stopped the prosecution; Dutertre having succeeded in proving that the girl was not responsible for her actions. . . . Already, no one bothered any more about the affair.) Thanks to these methods, he was poisoning the countryside but, out of a couple of hundred scoundrels, he had constituted himself a bodyguard who would murder and die for him. He would be made a Deputy. What else mattered!

As for us, good heavens! *We* made roses. Five or six thousand roses is no light matter. The little ones' class was busy to the last child making garlands of pleated paper in pastel colours which would float all over the place at the whim of the breeze. Mademoiselle was afraid that these preparations would not be

finished in time and gave us provisions of tissue paper and wire to take away every afternoon when school was over. We worked at home, after dinner, before dinner, without respite: the tables in all our houses were loaded with roses—white, blue, red, pink and yellow ones—full-blown, crisp and fresh on the end of their stalks. They took up so much room that one didn't know where to put them; they overflowed everywhere, blooming in multi-coloured heaps, and we carried them back in the morning in sheaves, looking as if we were going to wish relatives a happy birthday.

The Headmistress, bubbling over with ideas, also wants to construct a triumphal arch at the entrance to the Schools: the side-pillars are to be built up with pine-branches and dishevelled greenery, stuck with quantities of roses. The pediment is to bear this inscription, in letters of pink roses on a ground of moss:

WELCOME TO OUR VISITORS!

Charming, isn't it?

I've had my inspiration too: I have suggested the idea of crowning the flag—meaning us three—with flowers.

"Oh, yes," Anaïs and Marie Belhomme screeched delightedly.

"That's fixed then. (Hang the expense!) Anaïs, you'll be crowned with poppies; Marie, you'll be diademmed with corn-flowers and, as for me, whiteness, candour, purity, I shall wear . . ."

"What? Orange blossoms?"

"I've still a right to it, Miss! More than *you* have, no doubt!"

"Do lilies seem immaculate enough to you?"

"You make me *sick*! I shall choose marguerites; you know perfectly well the tricolour bouquet is made up of marguerites, poppies and cornflowers. Let's go down to the milliner's."

Looking disdainful and superior, we made our choice. The milliner took our head measurements and promised "the very best that could be made".

The next day we received three wreaths which grieved me to the heart; diadems that bulged in the middle like the ones country brides wear; how on earth could one look pretty in

that? Marie and Anaïs, enraptured, tried theirs on in the midst of an admiring circle of juniors; *I* said nothing, but I took my accessory home where I quietly took it to pieces. Then, on the same wire frame, I reconstructed a fragile, slender wreath with the big, starry marguerites placed as if by chance, ready to drop away; two or three flowers hung in bunches about my ears, a few trailed behind in my hair; then I tried my creation on my head. I'm only telling you that much! No danger of my letting the two others in on it!

An additional job has descended on us: the curl-papers! You don't know, you couldn't be expected to know. Learn then that, at Montigny, a schoolgirl could not assist at a prize-giving, or at any solemnity, without being duly curled or waved. Nothing strange in that, certainly, although those stiff corkscrews and excessive twistings make the hair resemble teased brooms more than anything else. But the Mammias of all these little girls, seamstresses, women market-gardeners, wives of labourers and shopkeepers have neither the time, nor the wish, nor the skill to put all those heads in curl-papers. Guess to whom this work, sometimes far from appetising, reverts? To the teachers and to the pupils of the First Class! Yes, it's crazy, but you see it's the custom and that word is the answer to everything. A week before the prizegiving, juniors badger us and inscribe themselves on our lists. Five or six for each of us, at least! And for one clean head with pretty, supple hair, how many greasy manes—not to mention inhabited ones!

Today we began to put these creatures, ranging from eight to eleven years old, in curl-papers. Squatting on the ground, they abandoned their heads to us and, for curlers, we used pages from our old exercise-books. This year, I was only willing to accept four victims and chosen, moreover, among the clean ones; each of the other big girls was being hairdresser to six little ones! A far from easy job, since nearly all girls in the country round here possess great bushy manes. At midday, we summoned our docile flock: I began with a fair-haired little thing with fluffy hair that curled softly by nature.

"Why, whatever are you doing here? With hair like that, you want me to frizz it in curl-papers? It would be a massacre!"

"Fancy! But of *course* I want it curled for me! Not curled, on a Prizeday, on a day a Minister's coming! Whoever heard of such a thing!"

"You'll be as ugly as the fourteen deadly sins! You'll have stiff hair, sticking out all round your head like a scarecrow. . . ."

"I don't care. At least, I'll be curled."

Since she insisted! And to think they all felt as she did! I was prepared to bet that Marie Belhomme herself . . .

"I say, Marie, you who've got natural corkscrews, I'm sure *you'll* stay as you are, won't you?"

She screeched with indignation at the idea:

"Me? Stay as I am? Don't you think it! I'd arrive at the prizegiving with a flat head!"

"But *I'm* not going to frizz myself."

"My dear, you curl tight enough. And besides your hair goes into a "cloud" quite easily . . . and besides everyone knows your ideas are never the same as everyone else's."

As she spoke she was vivaciously—too vivaciously—rolling the long locks, the colour of ripe wheat, of the little girl who was sitting in front of her, buried in her hair—a bush from which there occasionally issued shrill squeaks.

Anaïs, not without deliberate malice, was maltreating her patient, who was howling.

"Well, she's got too much hair, this one," she said, by way of excuse. "When you think you've finished, you're only half-way. You wanted it—you're here—try not to scream!"

We curled, we curled . . . the glass-paned corridor was filled with the rustle of the folded paper we twisted into the hair. . . . Our work achieved, the juniors stood up with a sigh of relief and displayed heads bristling with wisps of paper on which one could still read: "Problems . . . morals . . . Duc de Richelieu . . ." During the next four days they will go about the streets and the School, looking utter little frumps, without the least shame. But it's the custom and that's that.

. . . Our life had become completely disorganised. We were

always out-of-doors, trotting hither and thither, carrying home or bringing back roses, begging—we four, Anaïs, Marie, Luce and I—requisitioning flowers, real ones this time, to decorate the banqueting-hall. Sent by Mademoiselle, who counted on our innocent young faces to disarm the conventional, we went into the houses of people we had never seen. It was thus we paid a visit to Paradis, the Registrar, because rumour accused him of being the possessor of dwarf rose-trees, little marvels. All shyness gone, we burst into his peaceful office with: "Good morning, Monsieur! We've been told you have some lovely rose-trees, it's for the flower-stands in the banqueting-hall, you know, we've been sent by, etc., etc." The poor man muttered something into his great beard and led us out, armed with a pair of *sécateurs*. We departed with our arms loaded with pots of flowers, laughing, chattering, cheekily answering back the people who, at the entrance to each street, were all busy erecting the framework of triumphal arches. They called out to us: "Hi! You nice little pieces, there! Want someone to lend a hand? We'll find you one, all right. . . . Hoy! look out! There's one just going to fall! You're losing something, pick it up!" Everyone knew each other; everyone addressed each other familiarly as "*tu*". . . .

Today and yesterday, the boys went off in the carts at dawn and did not come back till sunset, buried under branches of box, larch and *arbor vitæ*, under cartloads of green moss that smelt of the bogs; afterwards they went off drinking, as usual. I have never seen these gangs of ruffians in such a state of excitement; normally they don't care a fig about anything, even politics. Now they emerged from their woods, their hovels, from the bushes where they spied on the girls who looked after the cows, to embower Jean Dupuy! It was beyond all comprehension! Lou-chard's gang, six or seven ne'er-do-wells who had pillaged the forests, went by, singing, invisible under heaps of ivy that trailed behind them, rustling softly.

The streets fought among themselves in rivalry; the Rue du Cloître erected three triumphal arches because the Grande-Rue had planned two, one at each end. But the Grande-Rue, put on its mettle, constructed a marvellous affair, a medieval castle, all

in pine-branches trimmed even with shears, with pepper-pot turrets. The Rue des Fours-Barraux, just by the School, came under the rural-arty influence of Mademoiselle Sergent. It confined itself to covering the houses on either side with a complete tapestry of long-tressed, dishevelled branches and then putting battens across from each house to the one opposite and covering this roof with hanging masses of intertwining ivy. The result was a delicious arbour, dusky and green, in which voices were muted as if in a thickly-curtained room; people walked to and fro under it for sheer pleasure. Furious at this, the Rue de Cloître lost all restraint and linked its three triumphal arches together with clusters of mossy garlands stuck with flowers so as to have *its* arbour too. Whereupon, the Grande-Rue calmly set to and took up its pavements and erected, in their stead, a wood! Yes, honestly, a real little wood on either side with young trees that had been uprooted and replanted. It would only have needed a fortnight of this furious emulation for everyone to be cutting each other's throats.

The masterpiece, the jewel, was our School—rather our Schools. When it was all finished, not a square inch of wall would be visible under the greenery, the flowers and the flags. Mademoiselle had requisitioned an army of young men; the bigger boys and the assistant-masters, all of whom she directed with a rod of iron; they obeyed her without a murmur. The triumphal arch at the entrance had now seen the light of day; standing on ladders, the two mistresses and the four of us had spent three hours “writing” in pink roses on the pediment:

WELCOME TO OUR VISITORS!

while the boys amused themselves by ogling our calves. From up above, from the roofs and windows and all the rough surfaces of the walls, there flowed and rippled such a cascade of branches, of red, white and blue material, of ropes masked with ivy, of hanging greenery and trailing roses that the huge building seemed to undulate from base to summit in the light wind and to be gently swaying. You entered the School by lifting a rustling curtain of flower-decked ivy and the fairy-like atmosphere con-

tinued inside. Ropes of roses outlined the corners, were festooned from wall to wall and hung at the windows: it was adorable.

In spite of our activity, in spite of our bold incursions on garden-owners, this morning we saw ourselves on the point of being short of flowers. General consternation! Curl-papered heads bent forward agitatedly around Mademoiselle who was brooding, with knitted brows.

"All the same, I've got to have some!" she exclaimed. "The whole stand on the left hasn't any at all; we must have flowers in pots. You rovers, come here at once!"

"Here, Mademoiselle!"

We sprang up, all four of us (Anaïs, Marie, Luce, Claudine); we sprang forth from the buzzing throng, ready to dash away.

"Listen. You're to go and see old Caillavaut. . . ."

"Oh! ! ! . . ."

We hadn't let her finish. You must realise that old Caillavaut is a miser, a regular Harpagon, slightly mad, spiteful as the plague and immensely rich. He owns a magnificent house and grounds which no one is allowed to enter but himself and his gardener. He is feared for being extremely malicious, hated for being a miser and respected as a living mystery. And Mademoiselle wanted us to go and ask him for flowers! She couldn't have realised what she was doing!

". . . Now, now, now! anyone would think I was sending off lambs to the slaughterhouse! You'll soften his gardener's heart and you won't even *see* old Caillavaut himself. Anyway, what if you do? You've got legs to run away with, haven't you? Off you go!"

I took the three others off, though they were far from enthusiastic, for I was conscious of a burning desire, tinged with vague apprehension, to penetrate into this old maniac's domain. I urged them on: "Come on, Luce, come on, Anaïs! We're going to see terrific things, we'll be able to tell the others all about it . . . Why, they can be counted on the fingers of one hand, the people who've been inside old Caillavaut's place!"

Confronted with the great green door, where flowering, over-scented acacias overhung the wall, no one dared to pull the bell-

chain. Finally, I gave it a violent tug, thereby setting off a terrifying tocsin; Marie took three steps towards flight, and Luce, trembling, hid bravely behind me. Nothing happened; the door remained shut. A second attempt was equally unsuccessful. I then lifted the latch, which yielded, and, like mice, we crept in one by one, uneasily, leaving the door ajar. A great gravel courtyard, beautifully kept, lay in front of the fine white house whose shutters were closed against the sun; the courtyard expanded into a green garden, rendered deep and mysterious by its thick clumps of trees. . . . Rooted to the spot, we stared without daring to move; still no one to be seen and not a sound. To the right of the house were greenhouses, closed and full of marvelous plants. . . . The stone staircase widened out gently as it descended to the level of the gravel courtyard; on each step there were flaming geraniums, calceolarias with little tiger-striped bellies, dwarf rose-trees that had been forced into too much bloom.

The obvious absence of any owner restored my courage.

"I say, are you coming or not? We're not going to take root in the gardens of the Sleeping-Miser-in-the-Wood!"

"Ssh!" whispered Marie in terror.

"What d'you mean, ssh? On the contrary, we must call out! Hi, over there! Monsieur Caillavaut! Gardener!"

No answer; all remained silence. I went over to the greenhouses, and, pressing my face against the panes, I tried to make out what was inside; a kind of dark emerald forest, dotted with splashes of brilliant colour that must certainly be exotic flowers. . . .

The door was locked.

"Let's go," whispered Luce, ill at ease.

"Let's go," repeated Marie, even more anxious. "Suppose the old man jumped out from behind a tree!"

This idea made them flee towards the door; I called them back at the top of my voice.

"Don't be such dolts! You can see there isn't anyone here. Listen . . . you're each going to choose two or three pots, the best ones on the stone steps. We'll carry them off back there,

without saying anything and I think we'll have a huge success!"

They did not budge; definitely tempted, but nervous. I seized two clumps of "Venus's slippers", speckled like tit's eggs, and I made a sign that I was waiting. Anaïs decided to imitate me and loaded herself with two double geraniums; Marie imitated Anaïs, Luce too, and we all four walked discreetly away. Near the door, absurd terror seized us again; we crowded each other like sheep in the narrow opening of the door and we ran all the way to the School where Mademoiselle welcomed us with cries of joy. All at once, we recounted our Odyssey. The Headmistress, startled, remained in perplexity for a moment, then concluded light-heartedly:

"Well, well, we shall see! After all, it's only a loan . . . a slightly forced one." We've never, never heard one mention of it since, but old Caillavaut has put up a bristling defence of spikes and broken tiles on his walls (this theft earned us a certain prestige; they're connoisseurs in brigandage here). Our flowers were placed in the front row and then, goodness me!, in the whirlwind of the ministerial arrival, we completely forgot to return them; they now embellish Mademoiselle's garden.

For a good long time, now, this garden has been the one single subject of discord between Mademoiselle and that great fat woman, her mother. The latter, who has remained an out-and-out peasant, digs, weeds, tracks snails to their last retreats and has no other ideal than to grow beds of cabbages, beds of leeks, beds of potatoes—enough to feed all the boarders without buying anything, in fact. Her daughter's refined nature dreams of deep arbours, flowering shrubs, pergolas wreathed in honeysuckle—in short, of useless plants! As a result, one could alternately see Mother Sergeant giving contemptuous hacks with her hoe at the little lacquer-trees and weeping birches and Mademoiselle stamping an irritated heel on the borders of sorrel and the odourous chives. This battle convulses us with joy. I must be just and also admit that, everywhere else except in the garden and in the kitchen, Madame Sergeant effaces herself completely, never pays us a visit, never gives her opinion in discussions and bravely wears her goffered peasant's bonnet.

The most amusing thing, in the few hours that now remained to us, was arriving at the School and going home again through the unrecognisable streets, transformed into forest paths and parklike landscapes, all fragrant with the penetrating smell of cut firs. It was as if the woods that encircled Montigny had invaded it, had come in and almost buried it. . . . One could not have dreamed of a prettier, more becoming decoration for this little town lost among the trees . . . I cannot bring myself to say more "adequate", it's a word I simply loathe.

The flags, which will make all these green alleys ugly and commonplace, will all be in place tomorrow, not to mention the Venetian lanterns and the fairy-lights. What a pity!

No one felt embarrassed with us; the women and boys called out to us as we passed: "Hi! you there, you've got the trick of it! Come on, come and 'elp us a bit sticking in these roses!"

We "'elped" willingly. We climbed up ladders: my companions let themselves—all for the Minister's sake, of course!—be tickled around the waist and sometimes on the calves: I must say that no one ever allowed themselves those little pranks on the daughter of the "Gentleman of the slugs". In any case, with these boys who don't give it another thought once their hand is removed, it's inoffensive and not even annoying; I can understand the girls from the School falling in with the general behaviour. Anaïs allowed all liberties and yearned after still more; Féfed carried her down from the top of the ladder in his arms. Touchard, known as Zero, stuffed prickly branches of pine under her skirts; she gave little squeaks, like a mouse caught in a door, and half closed swooning eyes, without strength even to pretend to put up a defence.

Mademoiselle let us rest a little, for fear we should be too limp and tired on the great day. Besides, I really could not see what remained to be done; everything was decked with flowers, everything was in place; the cut flowers were soaking their stalks in buckets of cool water in the cellar; they would be scattered all over the place at the last moment. Our three bouquets arrived this morning in a big, fragile packing-case; Mademoiselle did not want us even to unnaïl it completely: she removed one

slat, and slightly lifted up the tissue-paper which shrouded the patriotic flowers and the cotton-wool from which came a damp smell: then old Madame Sergent promptly took the light case, in which rattled crystals of some salt that I don't know and that prevents flowers from fading, down to the cellar.

Nursing her principal subjects, the Headmistress sent us off, Anaïs, Marie, Luce and me, to rest in the garden under the hazels. Slumped in the shade on the green bench, our minds were almost blank; the garden hummed. As if stung by a fly, Marie Belhomme gave a start and suddenly began to unwind one of the big curl-papers that, for three days, had been quivering round her head.

“. . . 't 'you doing?”

“Seeing if it's curled, of course!”

“And supposing it isn't curled enough?”

“Why, I'll wet it tonight when I go to bed. But you can see—it's very curly—it's fine!”

Luce followed her example and gave a little cry of disappointment.

“Oh! It's as if I hadn't done anything to it at all! It corkscrews at the end, and nothing at all higher up—or next to nothing!”

She had, in fact, the kind of hair that is supple and soft as silk and that escapes and slips out of one's fingers and out of ribbons and will only do what it wants to do.

“So much the better,” I told her. “That'll teach you. Look at you . . . thoroughly miserable at not having a head like a bottle-brush!”

But she refused to be comforted, and, as I was weary of their voices, I went further off and lay down on the gravel, in the shade of the chestnut trees. I hadn't any distinct notions in my head; I was aware only of heat, of lassitude. . . .

My dress was ready, it was a success . . . I should look pretty tomorrow, prettier than the gawky Anaïs, prettier than Marie: that wasn't difficult, but it pleased me all the same. . . . I was going to leave school; Papa was sending me to Paris to a rich, childless aunt; I should make my début in the world, and a thousand blunders at the same time. . . . How should I do

without the country, with this hunger for green, growing things that never left me? It seemed insane to me to think that I should never come here again, that I should never see Mademoiselle any more, or her little Aimée with the golden eyes, or the scatter-brained Marie, or the bitch Anaïs, or Luce, always greedy for blows and caresses. . . . I should be unhappy at not living here any more. Moreover, now that I had the time, I might as well admit something to myself; that, in my heart of hearts, Luce attracted me more than I liked to own. It's no good reminding myself that she has hardly any real beauty, that her caressing ways are those of a treacherous little animal, that her eyes are deceitful; none of this prevents her from possessing a charm of her own, the charm of oddity and weakness and still innocent perversity—as well as a white skin, slender hands, rounded arms and tiny feet. But she will never know anything about it! She suffers on account of her sister whom Mademoiselle Sergent took away from me by main force. Rather than admit anything, I would cut out my tongue!

Under the hazels, Anaïs was describing her dress for tomorrow to Luce. I walked towards them, in an ill-natured mood, and I heard:

“The collar? There isn't any collar! It's open in a V in front and at the back, edged with a runner of silk muslin and finished with a cabbage-bow of red ribbon. . . .”

“‘Red cabbages, known as curly cabbages, demand a meagre, stony soil’; the ineffable Bérillon teaches us. That fills the bill perfectly, eh, Anaïs? Scarlet runners, cabbages . . . that's not a dress, it's a kitchen-garden.”

“My lady Claudine, if you've come here to say such witty things, you can stay on your gravel. We weren't pining for your company!”

“Don't get in a temper. Tell us how the skirt's made, what vegetables are being used to give it a relish? I can see it from here—there's a fringe of parsley all round!”

Luce was highly amused; Anaïs wrapped herself in her dignity and stalked off; as the sun was getting low, we got up too.

Just as we were shutting the garden gate, we heard bursts of silvery laughter. They came nearer and Mademoiselle Aimée passed us, giggling, as she ran, pursued by the amazing Rabastens who was pelting her with flowers fallen from the bignonia bush. This ceremonial opening by the Minister authorises pleasant liberties in the streets—and in the School too, apparently! But Mademoiselle followed behind, frowning and turning pale with jealousy: further on, we heard her call out: “Mademoiselle Lanthénay, I’ve asked you twice whether you’ve told your class to assemble at half-past seven.” But the other, in wild spirits, enchanted to be playing with a man and annoying her friend, ran on without stopping and the purple flowers caught in her hair and glanced off her dress. . . . There would be a scene tonight.

At five o’clock, the two ladies assembled us with considerable difficulty, scattered all over the building as we were. The Headmistress decided to ring the dinner-bell, thereby interrupting a furious galop that Anaïs, Marie, Luce and I were dancing in the banqueting-room under the flower-decked ceiling.

“Girls,” she cried, in the voice she used for great occasions, “you’re to go home at once and get to bed in good time! Tomorrow morning, at half-past seven, you’re all to be assembled here, dressed and your hair done, so that we don’t have to bother about you any more! You will be given your streamers and banners; Claudine, Anaïs and Marie will take their bouquets. . . . All the rest . . . you’ll see when you get here. Be off with you now, don’t ruin the flowers as you go through the doors and don’t let me hear so much as a mention of you till tomorrow morning!”

She added:

“Mademoiselle Claudine, you know your complimentary speech?”

“Do I know it! Anaïs has made me rehearse it three times today.”

“But . . . what about the prizegiving?” risked a timid voice.

“Oh! the prizegiving, we’ll fit that in when we can! In any case, it’s probable that I shall just give you the books here and

that this year there will be no public prizegiving, on account of the opening."

"But . . . the songs, the *Hymn to Nature*?"

"You'll sing them tomorrow, before the Minister. Now, vanish!"

This speech had caused consternation to quite a number of little girls who looked forward to the prizegiving as a unique festive occasion in the year; they went off perplexed and discontented, under arches of flower-decked greenery.

The people of Montigny, exhausted but proud, were taking a rest, sitting on their doorsteps and contemplating their labours; the girls used the rest of the dying day to sew on a ribbon or to put some lace round an improvised low neck—for the great ball at the Town Hall, my dear!

Tomorrow morning, as soon as it was light, the boys would strew the route of the procession with cut grass and green leaves, mingled with flowers and rose-petals. And if the Minister Jean Dupuy wasn't satisfied, he must be extremely hard to please, so he could go to blazes!

The first thing I did when I got up this morning was to run to the looking-glass; goodness, one never knew, suppose I'd grown a boil overnight? Reassured, I made my toilet very carefully: I was admirably early, it was only six o'clock: I had time to be meticulous over every detail. Thanks to the dryness of the air, my hair went easily into a "cloud". My small face is always rather pale and peaky, but, I assure you, my eyes and mouth are not at all bad. The dress rustled lightly; the underskirt of plain unspotted muslin swayed to the rhythm of my walk and brushed softly against my pointed shoes. Now for the wreath. Ah, how well it suited me! A little Ophelia, hardly more than a child, with those amusing dark shadows round the eyes! . . . Yes, they used to tell me, when I was little, that I had a grown-up person's eyes; later, it was eyes that were "not quite respectable": you can't please everyone and yourself as well. I prefer to please myself first of all. . . .

The tiresome thing was that tight round bouquet which was

going to ruin the whole effect. Pooh! it didn't matter since I was to hand it over to His Excellency. . . .

All white from head to foot, I set off to the School through the cool streets; the boys, in process of "strewing" called out coarse, monstrous compliments to the "little bride" who fled in shyness.

I arrived ahead of time, but I found about fifteen of the juniors already there, little things from the surrounding countryside and the distant farms; they were used to getting up at four in summer. They were comical and touching; their heads looked enormous with their hair frizzed out in harsh twists and they remained standing up so as not to crumple their muslin dresses, rinsed out in too much blue, that swelled out stiffly from waists encircled by currant-red or indigo sashes. Against all this white their sunburnt faces appeared quite black. My arrival had provoked a little "ah!" from them, hastily suppressed. Now they stood silent, greatly awed by their fine clothes and their frizzed hair, rolling an elegant handkerchief, on which their mother had poured some "smell-nice", in their white-cotton-gloved hands.

Our two lady mistresses had not appeared but, from the upper floor, I could hear little footsteps running. . . . Into the playground came pouring a host of white clouds, beribboned in pink, in red, in green and in blue; in ever-increasing numbers the girls arrived—silent for the most part, because they were extremely busy eyeing each other, comparing themselves and pinching their lips disdainfully. They looked like a camp of female Gauls, those flying, curly, frizzy, overflowing manes, nearly all of them golden. . . . A clattering troop poured down the staircase; it was the boarders—always a hostile and isolated band—for whom their First Communion dresses still did duty on festive occasions. Behind them came Luce, dainty as a white Persian, charming with her soft, fluttering curls and her complexion like a newly-opened rose. Didn't she only need a happy love-affair, like her sister, to make her altogether beautiful?

"How lovely you look, Claudine! And your wreath isn't a bit like the two others. Oh, you *are* lucky to be so pretty!"

"But, kitten, do you know I find *you* amusing and desirable

in your green ribbons? You certainly are an extremely odd little animal! Where's your sister and her Mademoiselle?"

"Not ready yet. Aimée's dress does up under the arm, just fancy! It's Mademoiselle who's hooking it up for her."

"I see. That may take quite a time."

From above, the voice of the elder sister called: "Luce, come and fetch the pennants!"

The playground was filled with big and little girls and all this white, in the sunlight, hurt one's eyes. (Besides, there were too many different whites that clashed with each other.)

There was Liline, with her disturbing Gioconda smile under her golden waves, and her sea-green eyes; and that young bean-pole of a "Matilde," covered to the hips in a cascade of hair the colour of ripe corn; there was the Vignale family, five girls ranging from eight to fourteen, all tossing exuberant manes that looked as if they had been dyed with henna. There was Nannette, a little sly-boots with knowing eyes, walking on two deep blonde plaits as long as herself and as heavy as dull gold—and so many, many others. Under the dazzling light, all these fleeces of hair blazed like burning bushes.

Marie Belhomme arrived, appetising in her cream frock and blue ribbons, quaint under the crown of cornflowers. But, good heavens, how big her hands were under the white kid!

At last, here came Anaïs and I sighed with relief to see how awful her hair looked in stiff, corrugated waves; her wreath of crimson poppies, too close to her forehead, made her complexion look like a corpse's. With touching accord, Luce and I ran to meet her and burst out into a concert of compliments: "My dear, how nice you look! Honest, my dear—*definitely*—there's nothing so becoming to you as red! It's a complete success!"

A little mistrustful at first, Anaïs dilated with pleasure and we staged a triumphal entry into the classroom where the children, their numbers now complete, greeted the living *tricolore* flag with an ovation.

A religious silence descended: we were watching our two mistresses walk slowly and deliberately, step by step, down the

pulling off one of my strapless shoes and applying it to the face of the bitchier of the two Jauberts who had slyly jostled me.

The Minister, escorted by the General, the Prefect and a host of councillors, secretaries and I don't know what else (I'm not up in that world) who had forced a way for him through the crowd, had mounted the platform and installed himself in the handsome, over-gilded armchair that the Mayor had specially provided from his own drawing-room. A meagre consolation for the poor man who was tied to his bed with gout on that unforgettable day! Monsieur Jean Dupuy sweated and mopped himself; what would he not have given for it to be tomorrow! Still, that's what he's paid for. . . . Behind him, in concentric semi-circles, sat the district councillors and the municipal council of Montigny . . . all those perspiring people couldn't smell very agreeable. . . . Well, and what about us? Was it over, our glory? Were we to be left down there, without anyone so much as offering us a chair? That was really too much! "Come on, all of you, we're going to sit down." Not without difficulty, we made ourselves a gangway as far as the platform, we, the flag, and all the pennant-bearers. There, lifting my head, I hailed Dutertre in an undertone—he was chatting, leaning over the back of the Prefect's chair right at the edge of the platform. "Sir, hi, Sir! Monsieur Dutertre, I say! . . . Doctor!" He heard that appeal better than the others and bent down, smiling and showing his fangs: "It's you! What do you want? My heart? I give it to you!" I was quite sure he was drunk already.

"No, Sir, I'd much rather have a chair for myself and some others for the girls with me. They've abandoned us there all by ourselves, with the mere mortals—it's heart-rending."

"That cries out for justice, pure and simple. You shall all sit in tiers on the steps so that the populace can at least refresh its eyes while we're boring them with our speeches. Up with the lot of you!"

We did not wait to be asked twice. Anaïs, Marie and I climbed up first, with Luce, the Jauberts and the other pennant-bearers behind us. Their lances got caught and entangled in

each other and they tugged them furiously, their teeth gritted and their eyes lowered because they thought the crowd was laughing at them. A man—the sacristan—took pity on them and obligingly collected the little flags and carried them away; no doubt the white dresses, the flowers and the banners gave the good fellow the illusion that he was assisting at a slightly more secular Corpus Christi procession, and, from long force of habit, he removed our candles—I mean our flags—at the end of the ceremony.

Installed and enthroned, we gazed at the crowd at our feet and the Schools in front of us, those Schools so charming to-day under the curtains of greenery and flowers, under all that quivering decoration that hid their bleak, barrack-like look. As to the vulgar herd of our schoolmates, left standing down below, who stared at us enviously, and nudged each other and gave sickly smiles, we disdained them.

On the platform, there was a scraping of chairs and some coughing: we half-turned round to see the orator. It was Dutertre; he was standing up, in the middle, lithe and bowing, and preparing to speak without notes, empty-handed. A deep hush descended. One could hear, as at High Mass, the shrill weeping of a small child who was pining to get away, and, just as at High Mass, it raised a laugh. Then:

Mr. Minister,

.

He did not speak for more than two minutes; his speech was deft and ruthless, packed with fulsome compliments and subtle scurrilous allusions, of which I probably only understood a quarter. It was savage against the Deputy and charming towards all the rest of humanity; towards his glorious Minister and dear friend—they must have done some dirty deals together—towards his dear fellow-citizens, towards the Headmistress, “so unquestionably of the very highest order, Gentlemen, that the number of awards and certificates gained by her pupils dispenses me from any other encomium,” . . . (Mademoiselle Sergent, seated down below, modestly lowered her head beneath her veil); even,

believe it or not, towards *us*: "flowers carrying flowers, a feminine flag, patriotic and enchanting." At this unexpected thrust, Marie Belhomme lost her head and covered her eyes with her hand, Anaïs renewed her vain efforts to blush, and I could not prevent myself from rippling my spine. The crowd looked at us and smiled at us, and Luce winked at me. . . .

. . . *of France and of the Republic!*

The clapping and the shouts of applause lasted five minutes, so violent that they went *bzii* in one's ears; while they were dying down, the lanky Anaïs said to me:

"My dear, d'you see Monmond?"

"Where? . . . Yes, I see him. Well, what about him?"

"He keeps staring all the time at that Jaublin girl."

"Does that give you corns?"

"No, but honest! He must have queer tastes! Just look at him! He's making her stand on a bench and he's holding her up! I bet he's feeling if she's got firm calves."

"Probably. Poor Jeannette, I wonder whether it's only the arrival of the Minister that's put her in such a state of excitement! She's as red as your ribbons and she's trembling all over. . . ."

"Old thing, do you know who Rabastens is getting off with?"

"No."

"Look at him, you'll soon see."

It was true; the handsome assistant-master was fixedly gazing at someone. . . . And that someone was my incorrigible Claire, dressed in pale blue, whose lovely, rather melancholy eyes were dwelling with satisfaction on the irresistible Antonin. . . . Good! My First Communion partner was caught again! It wouldn't be long before I should be hearing romantic descriptions of meetings, of delights, of desertions. . . . Lord, how hungry I was!

"Aren't you hungry, Marie?"

"Yes, I am a bit."

"I'm dying of starvation. I say, do you like the milliner's new dress?"

"No, I think it's loud. She thinks the more a dress shrieks at

you, the smarter it is. The Mayoress ordered hers from Paris, did you know?"

"Fat lot of good *that's* done her! She wears it like a dog dressed-up. The watchmaker's wife has got on the same bodice she wore two years ago!"

"Yes, I know! But she wants to give her daughter a dowry so she's got good reason, poor thing!"

The revered little Jean Dupuy had stood up and was beginning his reply in a dry voice, wearing an air of importance that was highly diverting. Luckily, he did not speak for long. Everyone clapped, including ourselves, as loud as we could. It was amusing, all those heads waving, all those hands beating in the air down there at our feet, all those black mouths yelling. . . . And what glorious sunshine over it all! a trifle too hot. . . .

There was a scuffling of chairs on the platform; all their Lordships were getting up. They signed to us to go down; they led the Minister away to feed; now we could go off to lunch!

With great difficulty, tossed about in the crowd which kept pushing in opposite directions, we managed at last to get out of the courtyard into the square where the cohorts were thinning out a little. All the little girls in white were going off, alone or with the immensely proud Mammias who were waiting for them; the three of us were going to separate, too.

"Did you enjoy yourself?" asked Anaïs.

"Certainly I did. It went off very well—it was great fun!"

"Well, to my mind Somehow, I thought it would have been more amusing. . . . It needed a bit of livening-up, in fact!"

"Shut up, you give me a pain! I know what *you* thought it needed. You'd have liked to stand up and sing something, all by yourself on the platform. Then the whole thing would have immediately seemed much gayer to you."

"Go on, you can't hurt *my* feelings. Everyone knows what those polite remarks mean from *you*!"

"As for me," confessed Marie, "I've never enjoyed myself so much in my life. Oh! What he said about us . . . I didn't know where to hide myself! . . . What time do we have to be back?"

"Two o'clock precisely. That means half-past two, you can be quite sure the banquet won't be finished before that. Good-bye, see you very soon!"

At home, Papa enquired with interest:

"Did he speak well, Méline?"

"Méline! Why not Sully? It's Jean Dupuy, you know, Papa!"

"Yes, yes."

But he found his daughter pretty and looked at her with satisfaction.

After lunch, I tidied myself up; I rearranged my wreath of marguerites, I shook the dust off my muslin skirts and I waited patiently for two hours, fighting off with all my might a violent desire to take a siesta. Heavens, how hot it would be down there!—"Fanchette, don't touch my skirt, it's muslin. No, I'm not going to catch flies for you, can't you see I'm receiving the Minister?"

I went out once again; the streets were already humming and rang with the sound of footsteps, all of which were going downhill towards the Schools. Nearly all my schoolmates were already there when I arrived; red faces, muslin skirts already limp and crumpled; the crisp freshness of this morning had gone. Luce was stretching and yawning; she had eaten her lunch too fast; she was sleepy; she was too hot; she could "feel herself growing claws". Anaïs alone remained the same; just as pale, just as cold, neither languid nor excited.

Our two mistresses came down at last. Mademoiselle Sergent, her cheeks burning, was scolding Aimée who had stained the hem of her skirt with raspberry juice; the spoilt little thing sulked and shrugged her shoulders and turned away, refusing to see the tender beseeching in her friend's eyes. Luce eagerly watched all this, fuming and sneering.

"Now, now, are you all of you here?" scolded Mademoiselle, who, as usual, was visiting her personal resentments on our innocent heads. "Whether you are or not, we're leaving now. I've no desire to hang . . . to wait about here for an hour. Get into line—and quicker than lightning!"

We needn't have hurried! Up there, on that enormous plat-

form, we marked time for ages, for the Minister lingered endlessly over his coffee and all that went with it. The crowd, herded like sheep down below, looked up at us and laughed, with the sweating faces of people who have lunched heavily. . . . The "Society" ladies had brought camp-stools; the innkeeper from the Rue du Cloître had set out benches, which he was hiring out at two sous a place; and the boys and girls had piled on to them, shoving each other; all those people, tipsy, coarse and cheerful, waited patiently, exchanging loud ribaldries which they shouted to each other from a distance with tremendous laughs. From time to time, a little girl in white forced her way through to the steps of the platform, climbed up and got herself hustled and pushed into the back rows by Mademoiselle whose nerves were on edge from all these delays and who was champ-ing her bit under her eye-veil. She was even more furious on account of little Aimée who was making great play with her long lashes and her lovely eyes at a group of draper's assistants who had bicycled over from Villeneuve.

A great "Ah!" heaved the crowd towards the doors of the banqueting-room which had just opened to let out the Minister, even redder and more perspiring than this morning, followed by his escort of black dress-suits. Already people made way for him with more familiarity, with smiles of recognition: if he stayed here three days, the rural policeman would be tapping him on the stomach, asking him for a tobacconist's shop for his daughter-in-law who's got three children, poor girl, and no husband.

Mademoiselle massed us on the right-hand side of the platform, for the Minister and his confederates were going to sit on this row of seats, the better to hear us sing. Their Lordships installed themselves; Dutertre, the colour of Russian leather, was laughing and talking too loud, drunk, as if by accident. Mademoiselle threatened us under her breath with appalling punishments if we sang out of tune, and off we went with the *Hymn to Nature*:

Lo, the sky is tinged with morning,
Glowing beams grow brighter yet:

Haste, arise! the day is dawning,
Honest toil demands our sweat!

(If it's not content with the sweat of the official cortège, honest toil must demand a great deal!)

The small voices were a little lost in the open air; I did my very utmost to superintend the "seconds" and the "thirds" simultaneously. Monsieur Jean Dupuy vaguely followed the beat by nodding his head; he was sleepy, dreaming of the report in the *Petit Parisien*. The whole-hearted applause woke him up; he stood up, went forward and clumsily complimented Mademoiselle Sergent who promptly turned shy, stared at the ground and retired into her shell. . . . Queer woman!

We were dislodged and the pupils of the boys' School took our place. They had come to bray in chorus a completely imbecile song:

Sursum corda! Sursum corda!
Up all hearts! this noble order
Be the cry that spurs our soul!
Rally, brothers, thrust aside
All that might our wills divide,
March on firmly to the goal!
Fling cold selfishness away,
Traitors, who for wealth betray,
Are not such a bitter foe
To the burning love we owe
As patriots to . . . etc., etc. . . .

After them, the brass-band of the main town, "The Friendly Club of Fresnois", came to shatter our ears. It was excessively boring, all this! If I could only find a peaceful corner. . . . And then, since no one was paying the least attention to us, upon my word, I left without telling anyone. I went back home, I undressed and I lay down till dinner-time. Why not? I should be fresher at the ball!

At nine o'clock, I was standing on the steps in front of the house, breathing in the coolness that was falling at last. At the

top of the street, under the triumphal arch, ripened paper balloons in the shape of huge coloured fruits. All ready, my gloves on, a white hood under my arm, a white fan clasped in my fingers, I waited for Marie and Anaïs who were coming to fetch me. . . . Light footsteps and well-known voices were heard approaching down the street, it was my two friends. . . . I protested:

"Are you mad? To leave for the ball at half-past nine! But the room won't even be lit up—it's ridiculous!"

"My dear, Mademoiselle said: 'It'll begin at half-past eight. In this part of the world, they're like that, you can't make them wait. They'll rush off to the ball as soon as they've wiped their mouths!' That's what she *said*."

"All the more reason not to imitate the boys and girls round here! If the 'dress-suits' dance tonight, they'll arrive about eleven, as people do in Paris, and we shall already have lost our bloom from dancing! Come into the garden for a little with me."

They followed me, much against their wills, into the dusky tree-lined paths where my cat Fanchette, dressed in white, like us, was dancing after moths, capering like a crazy creature. . . . She mistrusted the sound of strange voices and climbed up into a fir-tree, from which her eyes followed us, like two tiny green lanterns. In any case, Fanchette despised me these days: what with the examination, and the opening of the Schools, I was never there any more. I no longer caught her flies, quantities of flies, that I impaled in a row on a hatpin and which she picked off delicately in order to eat them, coughing occasionally because of a wing stuck uncomfortably in her throat; I hardly ever gave her coarse cooking-chocolate now or the bodies of butterflies, which she adored, and sometimes, in the evening, I went so far as to forget to "make her room" between two volumes of Larousse.—Patience, Fanchette darling! Soon I shall have all the time in the world to tease you and make you jump through a hoop because, alas! I shall never be going back to the School. . . .

Anaïs and Marie could not keep still and only answered me with absent-minded *Yeses* and *Noes*—their legs were itching to

dance. All right, we would go since they were so desperately keen to be off! "But you'll see that our lady mistresses won't even have come downstairs!"

"Oh! You know, they've only got to come down the little inside staircase to find themselves right in the ballroom; they'll take a peep now and then through the little door to see whether it's the right moment to make their entrance."

"Exactly. Whereas if we arrive too early, we'll look utter fools, all by ourselves—except for three cats and a calf—in that enormous room!"

"Oh! You're simply maddening, Claudine! Look! If there's nobody there, we'll go up the little staircase and rout out the boarders and we'll go downstairs again when the dancers have arrived!"

"All right. In that case, I'm quite willing."

To think I had feared that this great room would be a desert! It was already more than half-full of couples who were gyrating to the strains of a mixed orchestra (mounted on the garlanded platform at the far end of the room); an orchestra composed of Trouillard and other local violinists, trombonists and cornet-players mingled with sections of "The Friendly Club of Fresnois" in gold-braided caps. All of them were blowing, scraping and banging, far from in unison but with tremendous spirit.

We had to push our way through the hedge of people who were looking on and cluttering up the main doorway. Both the double doors were flung open for it was here, you realise, that a self-constituted vigilance committee took up its station! It was here that disapproving remarks and cackles were exchanged about the young girls' dresses and the frequency with which certain couples danced together.

"My dear! Fancy showing as much of one's skin as that! What a little hussy!"

"Yes, and showing what? Just bones!"

"Four times, *four times* running she's danced with Monmond! If only I were her mother, I'd give her what-for to teach her a lesson, I'd send her straight home to bed!"

"Those gentlemen from Paris, they don't dance like we do here."

"They certainly don't! You'd think they were afraid of getting themselves broken, they exert themselves so little. Now, our boys here, that's something like! They enjoy themselves without minding how hard they go at it!"

It was the truth, even though Monmond, a brilliant dancer, was restraining himself from doing flying leaps with outspread legs, "with deference to" the presence of the people from Paris. A dashing young spark, Monmond, over whom there was fierce rivalry! A lawyer's clerk, with a girl's face and black curly hair, how could you expect anyone to resist him!

We made a timid entrance, between two figures of a quadrille, and we walked slowly and deliberately across the room to go and seat ourselves on a sofa against the wall—three model little girls.

I had been fairly sure, in fact, I had seen for myself that my dress suited me and that my hair and my wreath made my little face look very far from contemptible—but the sly glances and the suddenly rigid countenances of the girls who were resting and fanning themselves made me quite convinced of it and I felt more at my ease. I could examine the room without apprehension.

The "dress-suits", ah! there weren't many of them! All the official group had taken the six o'clock train; farewell to the Minister, the General, the Prefect and their suite. There remained some five or six young men, mere secretaries, but pleasant and civilised, who were standing in a corner and seemed to be prodigiously amused at this hall, the like of which they had obviously never seen before. The rest of the male dancers? All the boys and young men of Montigny and its neighbourhood, two or three in badly cut evening clothes, the rest in morning-coats; paltry accoutrements for this evening party that was supposed to be an official occasion.

The female dancers consisted entirely of young girls, for, in this primitive countryside, a woman ceases to dance as soon as she is married. They had spared no expense tonight, the young ones! Dresses of pink muslin and blue muslin that made the swarthy complexions of these little country girls look almost

black, hair that was too sleek and not puffed out enough, white cotton gloves, and, in spite of the assertions of the gossips in the doorway, necks that were not cut nearly low enough; the bodices stopped their décolletage too soon, just where the flesh became white, firm and rounded.

The orchestra warned the couples to set to partners and, amidst the fan-strokes of the skirts that brushed our knees, I saw my First Communion partner, Claire, languid and altogether charming, pass by in the arms of the handsome assistant-master, Antonin Rabastens, who was waltzing furiously, wearing a white carnation in his buttonhole.

Our lady mistresses had still not come down (I was keeping assiduous watch on the little door of the secret staircase, through which they would appear) when a gentleman, one of the "dress-suits", came and made his bow to me. I let myself be swept off; he was not unattractive; too tall for me, but solidly built, and he waltzed well, without squeezing me too tight, and looking down at me with an amused expression. . . .

How idiotic I am! I ought to have been aware of nothing else but the pleasure of dancing, of the pure joy of being invited before Anaïs who was staring at my partner with an envious eye . . . and, yet, during that waltz, I was conscious only of unhappiness, of a sadness, foolish perhaps, but so acute that I could only just keep back my tears. . . . Why? Ah, because . . . —no, I can't be utterly sincere, I can only give a hint or two . . . —I felt my soul overwhelmed with sorrow because, though I'm not in the least fond of dancing, I should have liked to dance with someone whom I adored with all my heart. I should have liked to have that someone there so that I could relieve my tension by telling him everything that I confided only to Fanchette or to my pillow (and not even to my diary) because I so wildly needed that someone, and this humiliated me, and I would never surrender myself except to the someone whom I should completely love and completely know—dreams, in short, that would never be realised!

My tall waltzer did not fail to ask me:

"You like dancing, Mademoiselle?"

"No, Monsieur."

"But then . . . why are you dancing?"

"Because I'd rather be doing even that than nothing at all."

We went twice round the room in silence and then he began again:

"May one observe that your two companions serve you as admirable foils?"

"Oh, heavens, yes, one may! All the same Marie is quite attractive."

"You said?"

"I said that the one in blue isn't ugly."

"I . . . don't much appreciate that type of beauty. . . . Will you allow me to ask you here and now for the next waltz?"

"Yes, certainly."

"You haven't a dance-programme?"

"That doesn't matter: I know everyone here, I shan't forget."

He took me back to my seat and had hardly turned his back before Anaïs complimented me with one of her most supercilious "My dears!"

"Yes, he really is charming, isn't he? And you'd never believe how amusing it is to hear him talk!"

"Oh! Everyone knows *your* luck's right in today! *I've* been asked for the next dance, by Féfed."

"And me," said Marie, who was radiant, "by Monmond! Ah! Here comes Mademoiselle!"

Here, in fact, came both ladies. They stood framed in turn in the little doorway at the far end of the room; first, little Aimée who had only changed into an evening top, an all-white, filmy bodice from which emerged delicate, dimpled shoulders and slim, rounded arms; in her hair, just above the ear, white and yellow roses made the golden eyes look more golden still—they had no need of them to make them sparkle!

Mademoiselle Sergent, still in black, but trimmed with sequins this time, wore a dress that was cut only very slightly low at the neck, revealing firm, amber-tinted flesh. Her foaming hair cast a warm shadow over her ill-favoured face and made her eyes shine out; she really looked quite well. Behind her came the

serpentine train of the boarders, in white, high-necked dresses, all very commonplace. Luce rushed up to me to tell me that she made herself "décolletée" by tucking in the top of her dress, in spite of her sister's opposition. She had been right to do so. Almost at the same moment, Dutertre entered by the big main door; red, excited and talking too loud.

On account of the rumours that circulated in the town, the whole room was keenly watching these simultaneous entries of the future Deputy and his protégée. But neither of them fluttered an eyelash: Dutertre went straight up to Mademoiselle Sergent, greeted her and, as the orchestra was just beginning a polka, he boldly swept her off with him. She, flushed and with her eyes half-closed, did not talk at all and danced . . . very gracefully, upon my word! The couples re-formed and attention was turned elsewhere.

Having conducted the Headmistress back to her place, the District Superintendent came up to me—a flattering attention, very much remarked. He mazurkaed violently, without waltzing, but whirling round too much, squeezing me too tight and talking too much into my hair:

"You're as pretty as a cherub!"

"In the first place, Doctor, why do you call me '*tu*', like a child? I'm practically grown-up."

"No, have I got to restrain myself? Just look at this grown-up person! . . . Oh, your hair and that white wreath! How I'd love to take it off you!"

"I swear that *you* won't be the one who'll take it off!"

"Be quiet, or I'll kiss you in front of everyone!"

"No one would be surprised—they've seen you do it to so many others. . . ."

"True. But why won't you come and see me? It's not fear that stops you, you've got thoroughly naughty eyes. . . . You just see, I'll catch you again one of these days; don't laugh, you'll end by making me lose my temper!"

"Pooh! Don't make yourself out so wicked—I don't believe you."

He laughed, showing his teeth, and I thought to myself:

"Talk as much as you like: next winter, I'll be in Paris and you'll never run into me there!"

After me, he went off to whirl round with little Aimée, while Monmond, in an alpaca morning-coat, invited me to dance. I didn't refuse, certainly not! Provided they're wearing gloves, I'm very willing to dance with the local boys (the ones I know well) who are charming to me, in their way. Then I danced again with my tall "dress-suit" of the first waltz up till the moment when I took a little breather during a quadrille so as not to get flushed and also because quadrilles seem to me ridiculous. Claire joined me, gentle and languishing, softened tonight with a melancholy that became her. I questioned her:

"Tell me, is everyone talking about you because the handsome schoolmaster's being so assiduous?"

"Oh, do you think so? . . . They can't say anything, because there's nothing to say."

"Come on! You're not going to pretend to make mysteries with me, are you?"

"Good heavens, no! But it's the truth—there really is nothing! . . . Look, we've met twice, tonight's the third time. He talks in a way that's absolutely . . . captivating! And just now he asked me if I ever went for walks in the evening in the Fir Plantation."

"Everyone knows what that means. What's your answer going to be?"

She smiled, without speaking, with a hesitant, yet longing expression. She would go. They're odd, these little girls! Here was one who was pretty and gentle, docile and sentimental and who, from the age of fourteen, had got herself deserted by half a dozen lovers in succession. She didn't know how to manage them. It was true that I shouldn't have the least idea how to manage them either, in spite of all the magnificent arguments I put up.

A vague giddiness was coming over me, from spinning round and, above all, from watching others spin round. Nearly all the "dress-suits" had left, but Dutertre was whirling round with tremendous enthusiasm, dancing with all the girls he found attractive or who were merely very young. He swept them off their

feet, turned their heads, crushed them nearly to death and left them dazed, but highly flattered. After midnight, the hall became, from minute to minute, a homelier affair; now that the "foreigners" had gone, everyone was among their own friends again, the public of Trouillard's little dancing and drinking place on holidays—only one had more room to move in this big, gaily-decorated room and the chandelier gave a better light than the three oil-lamps of the *cabaret*. The presence of Doctor Dutertre did not make the boys feel shy, very much the reverse; already Monmond had stopped restraining his feet from sliding over the parquet floor. They flew, those feet, they sprang up above people's heads or shot wildly apart in prodigious "splits". The girls admired him and giggled into their handkerchiefs scented with cheap eau-de-Cologne. "My dear, isn't he a scream? There's nobody like him!"

All of a sudden, this enthusiastic dancer shot past, as brutally as a cyclone, carrying his partner like a parcel, for he had bet a "boocket of white wine", payable at the buffet installed in the courtyard, that he would "do" the whole length of the room in six steps of a galop; everyone had gathered round to admire him. Monmond won his bet, but his partner—Fifine Baille, a little slut who brought milk to the town to sell, and something else too, for anyone who wanted it—left him in a furious temper and cursed him:

"You great clumsy b——! You might easy have gone and split me dress! You ask me to dance again, and I'll clout you over the ear!"

The audience was convulsed with laughter and the boys took advantage of their being jammed together to pinch, tickle and stroke whatever was within reach of their hands. It was becoming altogether too gay; I would soon go home to bed. The lanky Anaïs, who had at last vanquished a lingering "dress-suit", was promenading about the room with him, fanning herself, and giving high, warbling laughs, rapturous at seeing the ball warming up and the boys getting excited; there would be at least one of them who would kiss her on the neck, or elsewhere!

Where on earth had Dutertre got to? Mademoiselle had ended

by driving her little Aimée into a corner and was making a jealous scene; after leaving her handsome District Superintendent, she had once more become tyrannous and tender; the other was listening, shaking her shoulders, her eyes far away and her brow obstinate. As to Luce, she was dancing desperately,—“I’m not missing one”—passing from arm to arm without getting breathless; the boys did not think her pretty but, once they had asked her to dance, they came back again; she felt so supple and small, melting into their arms, light as a snowflake.

Mademoiselle Sergent had disappeared now, vexed perhaps by seeing her favourite waltzing, in spite of her objurgations, with a tall fair counter-jumper who was squeezing her tight and brushing her with his moustache and his lips without her objecting in the least. It was one o’clock, I wasn’t enjoying myself a bit any more and I was going home to bed. During the break in a polka (here, they dance the polka in two parts, between which the couples promenade arm-in-arm round the room in Indian file), I stopped Luce as she was passing and forced her to sit down for a minute.

“Aren’t you getting tired of all this business?”

“Be quiet! I could dance for a whole week on end! I can’t feel my legs. . . .”

“So you’re thoroughly enjoying yourself?”

“I’ve no idea! I’m not thinking about anything at all, my head’s in a whirl, it’s simply marvellous! Still I like it awfully when they hold me tight. . . . When they hold me tight and we’re doing a fast waltz, it makes me want to scream!”

What was that we suddenly heard? The trampling of feet, the shrill cries of a woman who was being hit, screamed insults. . . . Were the boys fighting amongst themselves? But no, the noise definitely came from upstairs! The screams suddenly became so shrill that the couples stopped their promenade; everyone became anxious and one good soul, the gallant and absurd Antonin Rabastens, rushed to the door of the inside staircase and opened it . . . the tumult grew louder and I was thunderstruck to recognise the voice of Mademoiselle Sergent’s mother, that harsh old peasant-woman’s voice, yelling quite appalling things

Everyone listened, nailed to the spot, in absolute silence; their eyes fixed on that little doorway from which so much noise was coming.

“Ah! you bitch of a girl! It serves you right! Yes, I’ve broken my broom-handle on his back, that swine of a doctor of yours! Yes, I’ve given him a good whack on the bum all right! Ah, I’ve smelt a rat a good long time now! No, no, my beauty, I’m not going to hold my tongue, I don’t care a f——, I don’t for the fine folk at the ball! Let ’em hear, they’ll hear a nice thing to be sure! Tomorrow morning, no, not tomorrow—this very minute—I’m packing my bag. I won’t sleep in such a house, I won’t! You dirty little beast, you took advantage of him being drunk and incapable (*sic*) to get him into bed with you, that fellow that’ll grub in any muck-heap! So *that’s* why you got a rise in pay, you bitch in heat, you! If I’d made you milk the cows like I did, you’d never have come to this! But you’ll suffer for it, I’ll shout it everywhere, I’d like to see them point their fingers at you in the streets, I’d like to see you a laughing-stock! He can’t do nothing to me, your dirty dog of a District Superintendent, however much him and the Min’ster’s in each other’s pockets; I gave him such a whack that he ran away from me. He’s frightened of me, he is! Comes and does his filthy business here, in a room where I make the bed with my own hands every morning—and doesn’t even lock the door! Runs off he does, half in his shirt and nothing on his feet, so that his dirty boots are still there! Look, there’s his boots—take a good look at ’em!”

We could hear them being thrown down the stairs, bumping against the steps; one fell right down to the bottom and lay in the doorway, in the full glare of light, a patent-leather boot, all shining and elegant. . . . No one dared touch it. The infuriated voice grew less loud, retreated along the passages to the accompaniment of banging doors, and suddenly ceased. Then everyone looked at each other; no one could believe their own ears. The couples, still arm-in-arm, stood there perplexed, keyed-up for what might happen next; then, little by little, sly smiles appeared on mocking lips and ran all through the room, gradually turning

into bantering laughter till the band on the platform caught the infection and laughed as heartily as everyone else.

I looked round for Aimée and saw that she was as white as the bodice of her dress, her eyes were stretched wide, staring at the boot, the focal point of the entire room's gaze. A young man charitably went up to her, and offered to take her outside for a little to recover herself. . . . She cast panic-stricken glances all around her, then burst into sobs and rushed hurriedly from the room. (Weep, weep, my girl, these painful moments will bring you hours of even sweeter pleasures.) After this flight, no one hesitated to restrain their wholehearted amusement; everyone was nudging each other and saying: "I say, did you see *that!*"

It was then that I heard just beside me a hysterical laugh, a piercing, suffocating laugh, vainly stifled in a handkerchief. It was Luce, who was writhing, doubled-up, on a sofa, crying with pleasure, and wearing such an expression of unmitigated bliss on her face that *I* was overcome with laughter too.

"You've not gone out of your mind, have you, Luce, laughing like that?"

"Ah! Ah! . . . oh! let me alone . . . it's too good. . . . Oh! I'd never have dared to hope for that! Ah! Ah! I can go now, that'll keep me bucked for ages. . . . Lord, how that's done me good! . . ."

I took her off into a corner to calm her down a little. In the ballroom, everyone was chattering hard and no one was dancing any more. . . . What a scandal there would be in the morning! . . . But a violin launched a stray note, the cornets and trombones took it up; a couple timidly began a polka step, two others imitated them, then all the rest followed suit; someone shut the little door to hide the scandalous boot and the dance started up again, all the gayer and wilder for having witnessed such a comic, such a totally unexpected interlude! As for myself, I was going home to bed, completely happy at having crowned my schooldays with such a memorable night.

Farewell to the classroom; farewell, Mademoiselle and her girl

friend; farewell, feline little Luce and spiteful Anaïs! I am going to leave you to make my entry into the world;—I shall be very much astonished if I enjoy myself there as much as I have at school.

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MUSIC-HALL
SIDEELIGHTS

Translated by Anne-Marie Callimachi

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ON TOUR

The Halt

Here we are at Flers. . . . A bumpy, sluggish train has just deposited our sleepy troupe and abandoned us, yawning and disgruntled, on a fine spring afternoon, the air sharpened by a breeze blowing from the east, across a blue sky streaked with light cloud and scented with lilac just bursting into bloom.

Its freshness stings our cheeks, and we screw up our smarting eyes like convalescents prematurely allowed out. We have a two-and-a-half-hour wait before the train that is to take us on.

"Two and a half hours! What shall we do with ourselves?"

"We can send off picture postcards. . . ."

"We can have some coffee. . . ."

"We might play a game of piquet. . . ."

"We could look at the town. . . ."

The manager of our Touring Company suggests a visit to the Park. That will give him time for forty winks in the buffet, nose buried in his turned-up collar, heedless of his peevish flock bleating around him.

"Let's go and see the Park!"

Now we are outside the station, and the hostile curiosity of this small town escorts us on our way.

"These people here have never seen a thing," mutters the ingénue, in aggressive mood. "Anyhow, the towns where we don't perform are always filled with 'bystanders'."

"And so are those where we do," observes the disillusioned duenna.

We are an ugly lot, graceless and lacking humility: pale from too hard work, or flushed after a hastily snatched lunch. The rain at Douai, the sun at Nîmes, the salty breezes at Biarritz

have added a green or rusty tarnish to our lamentable touring "outer garments", ample misery-hiding cloaks which still pretentiously boast an "English style". Trailing over the length and breadth of France, we have slept in our crumpled bonnets, all of us except the *grande coquette*, above whose head wave pompously—stuck on the top of a dusty black velvet tray—three funereal ostrich plumes.

Today I gaze at these three feathers as if I had never seen them before; they look fit to adorn a hearse, and so does the woman beneath them.

She seems out of keeping in the "town where we don't perform", rather ludicrous, with her Bourbon profile and her recurrent "I don't know why everyone tells me I resemble Sarah! What do you think?"

A gay little squall tugs at our skirts as we turn the corner into a square, and the carefully waved tresses of the ingénue's peroxide hair stream out in the wind. She utters a shriek as she clutches her hat, and I can see across her forehead—between eyebrows and hair—a carelessly removed red line, the trace of last night's make up!

Why have I not the strength to look away when the duenna's bloomers brave the light of day! They are tan-coloured bloomers and fall in folds over her cloth booties! No mirage could distract my attention from the male star's shirt collar, greyish white, with a thin streak of "ochre foundation" along the neck-line. No enchanted drop-curtain of flowers and tremulous leafage could make me overlook the comic's pipe, that fat, old, juicy pipe; the fag-end stuck to the under-manager's lip; the purple ribbon, turning black, in the make-up man's button-hole; the senior lead's matted beard, ill-dyed and in part discoloured! They are all so crudely conspicuous in "the town where we don't perform"!

But what about myself? Alas, what made me dawdle in front of the watchmaker's shop, allowing the mirror there time to show me my shimmerless hair, the sad twin-shadows under my eyes, lips parched with thirst, and my flabby figure in a chestnut-brown tailor-made whose limp flags rise and fall with every step

I take! I look like a discouraged beetle, battered by the rains of a spring night. I look like a moulting bird. I look like a governess in distress. I look . . . Good Lord, I look like an actress on tour, and that speaks for itself.

At last, the promised Park! The reward justifies our long walk, dragging our tired feet, exhausted from keeping on our boots for eighteen hours a day. A deep, shady park; a slumbering castle, its shutters closed, set in the midst of a lawn; avenues of trees, just beginning to unfurl their sparse tender foliage; bluebells and cowslips studding the grass.

How can one help shivering with delight when one's hot fingers close round the stem of a live flower, cool from the shade and stiff with new-born vigour! The filtered light, kind to raddled faces, imposes a relaxed silence. Suddenly a gust of keen air falls from the tree-tops, dashes off down the alley chasing stray twigs, then vanishes in front of us, like an impish ghost.

We are tongue-tied, not for long enough.

"Oh, the countryside!" sighs the ingénue.

"Yes. If only one could sit down," suggests the duenna, "my legs are pressing into my body."

At the foot of a satin-boled beech we take a rest, inglorious and unattractive strollers. The men smoke; the women turn their eyes toward the blue perspectives of the alley, toward a blazing bush of rhododendrons, the colour of red-hot embers, spreading over a neighbouring lawn.

"For my part, the country just drains me . . ." says the comic with an unconcealed yawn, "makes me damned sleepy!"

"Yes, but it's healthy tiredness," decrees the pompous duenna.

The ingénue shrugs her plump shoulders: "Healthy tiredness! You make me sweat! Nothing ages a woman like living in the country, it's a well-known fact."

Slowly the under-manager extracts his pipe from his mouth, spits, then starts quoting: "*A melancholy feeling, not devoid of grandeur, surges from . . .*"

"Oh, shut up!" grumbles the *jeune premier*, consulting his watch as if terrified of missing a stage-entrance.

A lanky boy, tall and pale-faced, who plays odd-job parts, is

watching the movements of a little "dung-beetle" with steel-blue armour, teasing it with a long straw.

I take deep, exhaustive breaths, trying to detect and recapture forgotten smells that are wafted to me as from the depths of a clear well. Some elude me, and I am unable to remember their names.

None of us laughs, and if the *grande coquette* hums softly to herself, it is bound to be a broken, soulful little tune. We don't feel at ease here: we are surrounded by too much beauty.

At the end of the avenue a friendly peacock appears, and behind his wide-spread fan we notice that the sky is turning pink. Evening is upon us. Slowly the peacock advances in our direction, like a courteous park-keeper whose task it is to evict us. Oh, surely, we must fly! My companions are by now almost on the run.

"What if we missed it, children!"

We all know well enough that we shall not miss our train. But we are fleeing the beautiful garden, its silence and its peace, the lovely leisure, the solitude of which we are unworthy. We hurry towards the hotel, to the stifling dressing-rooms, the blinding footlights. We scurry along, pressed for time, talkative, screeching like chickens, hurrying towards the illusion of living at high speed, of keeping warm, working hard, shunning thought, and refusing to be burdened with regrets, remorse or memories.

Arrival and Rehearsal

Towards eleven o'clock we arrive at X, a large town (whose name is of no consequence), where we are fairly well paid and have to work hard; the pampered audiences demand "Star Numbers" straight from Paris. It is raining, one of those mild spring showers that induce drowsiness and reduce one's calves to pulp.

The heavy lunch and the smoky atmosphere of the tavern,

after a long night on the train, have turned me into a sulky little creature, reluctant to face the afternoon's work. But Brague stands no trifling.

"Shuffle your guts, come on. The rehearsal's at two sharp."

"Bother! I'm going back to the hotel to get some sleep! Besides, I don't like you addressing me in that tone of voice."

"Apologies, Princess. I simply wanted to beg you to have the extreme kindness of stirring up your wits. Fresh plasters await us!"

"What plasters?"

"Those of the 'Establishment'. We're opening cold tonight."

I had forgotten. This evening we are to inaugurate a brand new music-hall, called the "Atlantic", or the "Gigantic", or the "Olympic"—in any case, the name of a liner. Three thousand seats, an American Bar, attractions in the outer-galleries during the intervals, and a gipsy band in the main hall! We'll read about all these glories in tomorrow's papers. In the meantime it makes no difference to us, except that we are certain to cough in the dressing-rooms, since new central heating never works, making the place either too hot or not warm enough.

I meekly follow Brague, who elbows his way along the North Avenue, cluttered with clerks and shopgirls, hurrying, like ourselves, to their factories. A nipping March sun makes the rainy air smoke, and my damp hair hangs limp, as in a steam bath. Brague's too long overcoat flaps over his heels, gathering mud at each step. Taken at our face-value we are just worth ten francs per evening: Brague, speckled with dirt; myself drunk with sleep, sporting a Skye-terrier's hair-do!

I let my companion guide me and, half dozing, I run over in my mind a few comforting facts and figures. The rehearsal is fixed for two o'clock sharp; with delays, we can count on half past four. One-and-a-half to two hours' work with the orchestra and we should be back at the hotel about seven o'clock, there to dress, and dine, and return to the joint by nine; by a quarter to twelve I'll be in my own clothes again and just in time for a lemonade in the tavern. Well! Let's be reasonable and hope, God willing, that within ten little hours I shall once again be in a bed,

with the right to sleep in it until lunch-time the next day! A bed, a nice fresh bed, with smoothly drawn sheets and a hot water bottle at the end of it, soft to the feet like a live animal's tummy.

Brague turns left—I turn left; he stops short—I stop short.

“Good Lord!” he exclaims, “it isn't possible!”

Wide awake, I too judge at a glance that it really is not possible.

Huge dust-carts, laden with sacks of plaster, obstruct the street. Scaffolding screens a light coloured building that looks blurred and barely condensed into shape, on which masons are hastily moulding laurel wreaths, naked females and Louis XVI garlands above a dark porch. Beyond this can be heard a tumult of inarticulate shouts, a battery of hammers, the screeching of saws, as though the whole assembly of the Niebelungen were busy at their forges.

“Is that it?”

“That is it.”

“Are you certain, Brague?”

In reply I receive a fulminating glance, that should have been reserved solely for the Olympic's improvident architect.

“I just meant, you're certain we rehearse here?”

The rehearsal takes place. It passes all comprehension, but the rehearsal takes place. We go on through the dark porch under a sticky shower of liquid plaster; we jump over rolls of carpet in the process of being laid, its royal purple already bearing marks of muddy soles. We climb a temporary ladder leading, behind the stage floor, to the artistes' dressing-rooms, and finally we emerge, scared and deafened, in front of the orchestra.

About thirty performers are disporting themselves here. Bursts of music reach us during lulls in the hammering. In the conductor's rostrum a lean, hairy, bearded human being beats time with arms, hands and head, his eyes turned upward to the friezes with the ecstatic serenity of a deaf mute.

There we are, a good fifteen “Numbers”, bewildered, and already discouraged. We have never met before, yet we recognise each other. Here is the *diseur*, paid eight francs a night, who doesn't care a hoot what goes on.

"I don't care a d——. I'm engaged as from this evening, and cash-in as from this evening."

There is the comic, with a face like a sneaky solicitor's clerk, who talks of "going to law", and foresees "a very interesting case".

There is the German family, athletes of the flying trapeze, seven Herculean figures with childish features, affrighted, amazed, already worried by the fear of being thrown out of work.

There stands the little "songstress", who's always "out of luck", the one who's always in "trouble with the management", and is supposed to have been robbed of "twenty thousand francs-worth of jewellery" last month, Marseilles! Naturally she is also the one who's lost her costumes' trunk on her way here and has had "words" with the proprietor of her hotel.

There is even, out in front, an extraordinary little man, looking worn, his cheeks furrowed by two deep ravines, a "star tenor" in his fifties, grown old in goodness knows what outlandish places. Indifferent to the noise, he rehearses implacably.

Every other minute he flings his arms wide to stop the orchestra, rushing from the double-bass to the kettle-drums, bent in two over the footlights. He looks like a stormy petrel riding the tempest. When he sings, he emits long shrill notes, metallic and malevolent, in an attempt to bring to life an obsolete repertory in which he impersonates, in turn, Pedro the Bandit, the light-hearted cavalier who forsakes Manon, the crazed villain and his sinister cackling at night on the moors. He scares me, but delights Brague, who instinctively reverts to his nomad fatalism.

Risking his luck in the general confusion, my companion lights the forbidden "fag" and lends an amused ear to the "vocal phenomenon", a dark lady who spins out almost inaudible high C's.

"She's killing, isn't she? Makes me feel as if I were listening through the wrong end of my opera-glasses."

His laughter is infectious. Mysteriously a comforting cheerfulness starts to spread among us. We feel the approach of night, of the hour when the lamps are lit, the hour of our real awakening, of our glory.

"*ANANKE!*" suddenly shouts the litigious comic, a high-brow in his way. "If we perform, we perform; and if we don't . . . well we don't."

With a ballet-dancer's leap he skims over the edge of the stage-box, ready to give the electricians a helpful hand. The "out-of-luck" girl goes to crack an acid drop with the Herculean septet. My drowsiness has left me and I settle down on a roll of linoleum, side by side with the "vocal phenomenon" who is all set to tell my fortune! Still another carefree hour ahead, empty of thought or plans.

Happy in our obtuse way, devoid of intuition or foresight, we give no thought to the future, to misfortune, to old age—or to the impending failure of this altogether too new and luxurious "Establishment" which is due to go smash one month from today, precisely on "Saint-Pay-Day".

A Bad Morning

Not one of us four feels fit to face the harsh light that falls from the glass roof like a vertical cold shower. It is nine in the morning; that is, drawn for the likes of us who go to bed late. Is it really possible that there can still exist, within a mile or so, a warm bed and a breakfast cup still steaming with the dregs of scented tea? I feel as if I shall never again lay myself down in my bed. I find this rehearsal room, the scene of our reluctant and too early foregatherings, utterly depressing.

"Aah . . ." the lovely Bastienne yawns expressively.

Brague, the mimic, throws her a fearsome glance, as much as to say, "Serves you right." He is pale and ill-shaven, whereas the lovely Bastienne, battered and shrunk to nothing inside her sentry-box of a coat, would wring the heart of anyone other than a good companion, by the pink swellings under her eyes and her bloodless ears. Palestrier, the composer, his nose bright purple on a wan countenance, is the personification of a drunk who

has spent the night unconscious in a police-station. As for myself! Good God, a sabre slash across one cheek, limp skeins of hair, and skin left dry by my lazy bloodstream! One might think we are showing off, exaggerating our disgrace, in a fit of witless sadism. "Serves you right," say Brague's eyes, probing my sunken cheeks; while mine retort, "You're just such another wreck yourself."

Instead of shortening the rehearsal of our mime, we fritter time away. Palestrier starts on a salacious story, which could be funny, were it not that the dead cigarette he keeps masticating imparts a most obnoxious smell to his every word. The stove roars yet does not heat the hall, and we peer into its small mica-window, like chilled savages hoping for some miraculous sunrise.

"What do they burn in it, I wonder?" Palestrier hazards. "Newspaper logs, maybe, bound together with wire thread. I know how to make that stuff. I learned how from an old lady, the year I won my prize at the *Conservatoire*. She used to cough up three francs to make me play waltzes for her. There were times when I'd turn up, and she'd just say, 'We'll have no music today; my little bitch is nervy, and the piano puts her on edge!' So she would invite me to help with the fuel provision—nothing but newspapers and wire. It was she, too, who taught me how to burnish brass. I certainly didn't waste my time with her. In those days, providing I could feed, I would have clipped dogs and doctored cats!"

In the now glowing square of mica he gazes at the vision of his needy youth, the period when his talent struggled within him like a splendid, famished beast. As he sits staring, his pale-faced hungry youth becomes so alive that he reverts to the juicy slang of the suburbs, the drawling accent and thick voice; and, sticking both hands in his pockets, he allows a shudder to shake his frame.

On this harsh winter morning we lack courage, lack all incentive to face the future. There is nothing inside us to burst into flame or blossom amid the dirty snow. Crouched and fearful, we are driven back by the hour, the cold, our rude awakening, the momentary malevolence in the air, to the most miserable, most humiliating moments of our past.

"The same goes for me," Brague breaks out suddenly. "Just to be able to eat one's fill. . . . People who've always had plenty can't imagine what that means. I remember a time when I still had some credit at the pub, but never a chance to make any dough. When I drank down my glass of red wine . . . well, I could have cried just at the thought of a fresh little crust to dip into it."

"The same goes for me . . ." the lovely Bastienne takes her cue. "When I was a mere kid—fifteen or sixteen—I'd all but faint in the mornings at the dancing-class, because I hadn't had enough to eat; but if the ballet-mistress asked me whether I was ill, I'd brag and answer: 'It's my lover, Madame, he's exhausted me.' A lover indeed! As if I'd even known what it meant to have one! She'd throw her arms in the air: 'Ah, you won't keep your queenly beauty for long! But what on earth have you all got in those bodies of yours?' What I had *not* got in my body was a good plateful of soup, and that's a cert."

She speaks slowly, with assiduous care, as if she were spelling out her reminiscences. Sitting with her knees wide apart, the lovely Bastienne has sunk into the posture of a housewife watching her pot boil. Her "queenly beauty" and her brassy smile have been discarded as if they were mere stage props.

A few slammed chords, a run up the scale by stumbling numb fingers, excite a superficial thrill. I shall have to move out of the posture of a hibernating animal, head inclined on one shoulder, hands tightly clasped like cold-stricken paws. I was not asleep. I am only, like my companions, emerging from a bitter dream. Hunger, thirst . . . they should be a full-time torture, simple and complete, leaving no room for other torments. Privation prevents all thought, and substitutes for any other mental image that of a hot sweet-smelling dish, and reduces hope to the shape of a rounded loaf set in rays of glory.

Brague is the first to jump to his feet. Rough and ready advice and inevitable invective assume, as they flow from his lips, a most familiar sound. What a string of ugly words to accompany so graceful an action! How many traces of trial and error are to be seen on the faces of the three mimes, where effort sets a too

quickly broken mask! Hands that we compel to speak our lines, arms for an instant eloquent, seem suddenly to be shattered, and by their strengthless collapse transform us into mutilated statues.

No matter. Our goal, though difficult to attain, is not inaccessible. Words, as we cease to feel their urgency, become detached from us, like graceless vein-stones from a precious gem. Invested with a subtler task than those who speak classical verse or exchange witticisms in lively prose, we are eager to banish from our mute dialogues the earthbound word, the one obstacle between us and silence—perfect, limpid, rhythmic silence—proud to give expression to every emotion and every feeling, and accepting no other support, no other restraint than that of Music.

The Circus Horse

“Dressing-room 17, shall I find it along here?”

“ . . . ”

“Thank you very much, Madame. Coming straight in out of the street, one is quite dazed by the darkness of this corridor.

. . . So, as things are, it looks like our being neighbours!”

“ . . . ”

“True, it’s nothing to write home about, but I’ve seen worse, as artistes’ dressing-rooms go. Oh! please, don’t bother, I can drag it alone; it’s my costumes’ trunk. Anyway my husband won’t be long now: he’s engaged at present in speaking to the management. You’ve turned your dressing-room into something quite pretty, Madame. Ah! and there’s your poster. I caught sight of it on the walls on our way from the station. A full length poster, and in three colours, that always spells class. So you’re the lady with the detective dogs?”

“ . . . ”

“Oh, sorry, I was confusing you. Pantomime, that’s it, and very interesting too. It was actually in that line I first worked, before I took up the weights! Come to think of it, I had a little pink

apron with pockets, and patent-leather shoes, something after the *soubrette* style, you know. Pantomime's not much of a bind, when all's said and done. One hand on your heart, a finger to your lips, which goes for 'I love you', and then you take your bow, that's all there is to it! But I very soon got married, and off I went, to serious work!"

". . ."

"Yes, weights are my job. I don't look the part? Because I'm so small, you mean? That's just what deceives people, but you'll see for yourself tonight. We're billed as 'Ida and Hector', you've heard of us, surely? We've just done Marseilles and Lyons, on our way up from Tunis."

". . . !"

"Lucky? Because we've done a fortnight in Tunis? I don't see what's so lucky about that. Far rather play Marseilles and Lyons, or even Saint-Etienne. Hamburg! There's a proper town for you! Naturally I'm not talking of big capitals, like Berlin or Vienna, places one can call big cities, specially when it comes to real slap-up establishments."

". . . ?"

"Why, of course, we've moved around, gone places! You make me laugh, speaking so envious-like! As far as travelling goes, I'd willingly let you have my share, and no tears shed!"

". . . ?"

"Not that I've had enough of it, but that I've just never cared for travel. I'm the cosy sort. So's my husband, Hector. But, you see, there's just the two of us in our show and the best we can hope for is three weeks in the same town, or a month at most, in spite of our number being very good to look at, very well presented. Hector with his athletics, all very flexible and light, and me with my weights, and a very special whirl-wind waltz, very new, very stylish, to finish off our number. So—what more d'you want? We get around quite a bit, the way things go!"

". . . !"

"It's Tunis that gets you, that's clear enough! And I wonder why, considering the establishment there's no great shakes!"

". . . !"

"Oh, it's to see the town? and the surroundings too? Well, if that's your idea, I'm hardly the one to inform you; I've not seen much of it."

". . . ?"

"Yes, I've been a little bit here, a little bit there. It's a big enough town. There are lots of Arabs. Then there are the small booths—*souks* they call them—along the covered streets; but they're all badly kept, crammed one on top of the other, and downright lousy too. Why, it made me itch all over when I had to clean and throw away half the stuff! All that's sold there, I mean, rugs that are not even new, cracked pottery, everything second hand, so to speak. And the children, Madame! Scores of them, crawling on the bare ground, and half-naked too! And what about the men! Handsome fellows, Madame, who stroll along, never in a hurry—with a little bunch of roses, or violets, in their hand, or even tucked behind their ear, like a Spanish dancer! And nobody puts them to shame."

". . . ?"

"The country round about? I don't know. It's like here. The land is cultivated. When the weather's good it's quite pretty."

". . . ?"

"What sort of plants? Exotic? Oh! yes, like in Monte Carlo? Yes, yes there are palm trees. And also little flowers, that I don't know the names of. And then, lots of thistles. The people over there pick them and stick them on to long thorns, pretending they smell like white carnations. White carnations may be all right for you, but for me, smells just give me a headache!"

". . . ?"

"No. I've not seen nothing else. What do you take us for? We have our work, and that comes first. My routine in the morning, to start with, then a friction, then my complete toilet, and by then it's breakfast-time. Coffee and the daily papers, then I get busy with my work. D'you think it's a joke to keep two people spotless, underwear and all, without mentioning our stage-tights and costumes? I couldn't stick a stain or a missing stitch . . . that's how I am! Between Saint-Etienne and Tunis I made myself six slips and six pairs of under-pants, and I'd have completed

the dozen, had Hector not fancied he needed flannel waistcoats! And then there's the dressing-room to be kept clean, the hotel room has to be tidied up, expenses accounted for, money to be banked. I'm very particular, you see."

" . . . "

"Now you, who talk so much of travel, now you just take Bucharest! Never did a town bring me such trouble! The establishment had recently been renovated and the damp plaster-work sweated. At night, what with the heating and the lights, the walls of our dressing-room simply dripped water. I noticed that at once, and lucky I did, for imagine the mess it would have made of our stage costumes! You should have seen me every evening, at midnight, dragging about my two sequined dresses, the ones I wear in the whirl-wind waltz, one in each hand, on a couple of coat-hangers! And every day at nine I had to bring them back. Now please tell me if I could come away with happy memories of that town."

" . . . ?"

"Oh, you just leave me alone with your travel-mania! You won't make me change my mind on that subject, and I've visited enough countries, I can tell you. Towns, the world over, they're all the same! You'll always find first, a music-hall to work in; second, a tavern, Munich-styled, to eat in; third, a bad hotel to sleep in. When you've been all round the world, you'll think like me. Over and above that, there are nasty people everywhere, so one has to learn to keep one's distance; and one can count oneself lucky when one comes into contact, like today, with people who are good company and have class."

" . . . !"

"But not at all! No flattery intended, believe me. *Au revoir*, Madame, until tonight. When you've finished your number, I'll have the pleasure of introducing you to my husband, who will be as delighted as I was myself to make your acquaintance."

The Workroom

A small third-floor dressing-room, little more than a cramped closet with a single window opening on a narrow side-street. An over-heated radiator dries up the air, and every time the door opens the funnel of the spiral staircase belches up, like a chimney-stack, all the heat from the lower floors, saturated with the human odour of some sixty performers and the even more potent stench of a certain little place, situated near by.

Five girls are packed in here, with five rush-seated stools jammed between the make-up table and the recess in which are hung, hidden and protected by a greyish curtain, their costumes for the *Revue*. Here they live every night from seven-thirty till twenty minutes after midnight and, twice a week, for matinées, from half past one till six. Anita is the first to come in, rather out of breath, but with cool cheeks and moist lips. She shrinks back and exclaims: "Lord above! It's not possible to stay in here, it turns you up!"

She soon becomes accustomed to it, coughs a little, then doesn't give it another thought, since she only just has time to undress and make up. Her frock and underslip are removed quicker than a pair of gloves and can be hung up anywhere. But there comes a moment when she curbs her haste and her face assumes a serious expression. Anita cautiously extracts two long pins from her hat, and carefully sticks them back through the same holes. Then, under the four turned-up corners of an outspread newspaper, she religiously protects that garish yet dingy edifice that contrives to look like a combination of a Red Indian headdress, a Phrygian cap and a dressed salad. For everyone knows that grease-powder, flying in clouds from shaken puffs, spells death to velvet and feathers.

Wilson, the second on the scene, enters with a vacant look, hardly awake.

"Listen! Hell! I'd got something to tell you. . . . I must have swallowed it on the way."

She, too, takes off her hat according to established rites, then lifts a fringe of fair hair off her forehead, to disclose an incompletely healed scar.

"You can't imagine how my head still throbs from it!"

"Serves you right," interrupts Anita in a dry tone. "If you will go and get half the scenery on your 'nut', and if this happens in a joint where the managers are mean enough to send you home with tuppence-worth of ether on a handkerchief—without even paying the cab-fare or the doctor's fee—so that you have to stay put, half dead, for a whole week, and if you haven't even the self-respect to sue the management, then you do not complain, you just shut up. Now had it been me!"

Wilson does not reply, too busied—her features distorted by the effort—in trying to detach a long golden hair that is wickedly sticking to her wound. Besides, it is useless to answer back Anita, a born termagant and anarchist, always ready to "sue" or "get the story into the newspapers".

The three others arrive simultaneously: Régine Tallien, whose plump little housemaid's figure, abundantly furnished in front and behind, ironically casts her for pageboy parts, or "stylish male impersonations"; Maria Ancona, so dark she really believes herself a genuine Italian; and little Garcin, an obscure supernumerary, rather alarming, who flashes dark glances partly insincere, partly apprehensive, and is as thin as a starved cat.

They don't bother to pass the time of day, they meet too often. No rivalry exists between them because, with the exception of Maria Ancona, who has a small solo in the tarantella, they all vegetate in chorus routine. Nor is it Maria Ancona's "part" that little Garcin envies her, but much more the brand new dyed fox fur round her neck. They are not friends either, yet from being thus thrown together, crowded and almost choked to death in their cribbed cabin, they have developed a sort of animal satisfaction, the cheerfulness of creatures in captivity. Maria Ancona sings as she unfastens her garters, held together by safety-pins, and her stays with broken laces. She laughs to find that her slip

is torn under the arm and nettled by Régine Tallien, who wears the embroidered linen and stout cotton corsets of a well-behaved maidservant, she retorts: "Can't help it, my dear. I'm an artist by temperament! And d'you suppose I can keep my underwear clean with that horrible tin armour of mine!"

"Then do like me," whispers sly little Garcin; "don't wear any, any under-slips, I mean."

She is clothed only in a pair of trellised tights, all gold and pearls, with two openwork metal discs stuck over her non-existent breasts. The rough edges of her jewelled ornaments, the coarsely punched copper pendants, the clinking chain-armour she wears, scratch and mark her lean and apparently insensitive bare skin without her even noticing.

"Just admit," shouts Anita, "that the management ought to provide the slips worn on the stage! But you're all so thin-skinned, you're not even capable of claiming your dues!"

She turns a half made-up face towards her companions, a dead white mask with bright red goggles, that makes her look like a Polynesian warrior and, without even interrupting her tirade, she ties round her head a filthy silk rag, all that remains of a "wickerchief", intended to protect the hair from the brilliantine on the stage wigs.

"It's like this tattered duster I've got on my nut," continues Anita. "Yes, yes, go on saying it disgusts you, but I will-not-change-it! The management owes me one, and this *thing* can jolly well rot on my head, I will not replace it! My dues, that's all I care about."

Not one of them is carried away by her anarchic rage, knowing it to be merely verbal, and even little Wilson, wounded as she is, simply shrugs her shoulders.

The hour flies by, the unbreathable dryness of the air is now permeated by a hot dormitory smell. From time to time a dresser squeezes sideways into the room, somehow managing to move about, fastening a hook, tying the strings of stage-tights or the ribbons of a Greek buskin. Régine Tallien and Wilson have already fled, halberd in hand, to their medieval parade. Anita hastens behind Maria Ancona, because a voice from the stair-

case is calling out: "Ladies of the Tarantella, have I to come in person to fetch you?"

Little Garcin, whose asexual graces are kept in store for a "Byzantine Festival", now remains alone. Out of her sordid handbag she extracts a thimble, a pair of scissors, a piece of needlework already begun, and, perched on her rush-seated stool, she begins to sew with avid concentration.

"Oh!" cries Maria Ancona, returning hot and out of breath. "So she's already settled down to it!"

"What d'you expect," jealously echoes Anita, "for all the work she has to do on the stage!"

The sound of a cavalcade on the stairs and a shrill distant bell announce the end of the first act, bringing back Wilson, still slightly dazed and with an aching forehead, and Régine Tallien with her red man-at-arms wig. The daily break for the intermission, instead of bringing relaxation, seems to excite the girls. Off fly bicoloured tights and Neapolitan skirts, to be replaced by spongey dressing-gowns or cotton kimonos, mottled with the stains of cosmetics. Bare feet, unexpectedly bashful, grope under the make-up table for shapeless old slippers, while hands, pale or red, suddenly become cautious in unrolling lengths of linen and bits of imitation lace. They all inquisitively bend over Maria Ancona's unfinished "combination", the cynical little garment of a poor prostitute, outrageously transparent, sewn with broad, clumsy stitches. Little Garcin smocks fine muslin with the patience of a persistent mouse. Régine fills in her time hemming white handkerchiefs.

The five of them, now seated on their high rush stools, are busy and quiet, as if they had at last reached their goal at the end of the day. This half hour is theirs. And during this half hour they allow themselves, as a respite, the candid illusion of being cloistered young women who sew.

They suddenly fall silent, pacified by some unknown spell, and even the rowdy Anita gives no thought to her "dues," and smiles mysteriously at a table-cloth embroidered in scarlet. In spite of their gaping wraps, of their high-pitched knees, of the insolent rouge still blossoming on their cheeks, they have the

chaste attitude and bent backs of sedate seamstresses. And it is from the lips of little Garcin, naked in her beaded-net pants, that a childish little song, keeping time with her busy needle, involuntarily finds its way.

Matinée

"You see all those people in the char-à-bancs, don't you?—and those others in four-wheelers?—and again those in taxis? And you see the ones over there, in shirtsleeves on their doorsteps, and those sitting outside the cafés? Very well then! All that crowd do not have to play in a *matinée*. D'you hear me?"

". . . give a damn."

"But *you* are playing in a *matinée*!"

"Don't go on so, Brague!"

"I am playing in a *matinée*, too. We are playing in *matinée*. On Thursdays, and on Sundays too, we have a *matinée*."

I could slap him—were it not for the effort of lifting my arm. He continues, relentlessly. "There are also those who are not here, those who decamped to the country yesterday evening and won't come back to town till Monday. They're out under the trees, or taking a dip in the Marne. Well, they're doing what they're doing, but . . . *they are not appearing in a *matinée*!*"

As our taxi jerks to an abrupt stop, the dry wind, which had been baking our faces, suddenly drops. I feel the pavement burning through the thin soles of my shoes. My cruel companion stops talking and purses his mouth, as much as to say: "Now it's becoming serious."

At the dark and narrow stage-door there is still a trace of musty coolness. The doorman, dozing in his chair, wakes up as we pass to brandish a newspaper.

"Ninety-six in the shade, eh!"

He throws this figure at us, in triumph, yet scared, as if it were the death-roll in some grand-scale catastrophe. But we pass in

silence, sparing of speech and movement, in fact jealous of this old man who keeps watch in a shady paradise, a paradise invaded by stale cellar smells and ammonia, on the threshold of our own inferno. Anyhow, what do ninety-six degrees mean? Ninety-six, or ninety-six thousand, it's all the same. We have no thermometer up there on our second floor. Ninety-six degrees on the tower of Saint-Jacques? And what will it rise to during this afternoon's *matinée*? How high will it be in my dressing-room, with its two windows, two right royal windows facing due south and shutterless?

"There's no saying," sighs Brague, as he enters his cubicle, "we must jolly well be 'above normal' up here!"

After a dismal glance, devoid even of entreaty, at the panes set ablaze by the sun, I let my clothes drop off without any relief: my skin can no longer look forward to the biting little draught between door and window that only a month ago nipped my bare shoulders.

A strange silence reigns within our crowded cells. Opposite mine, a half-open door allows me a glimpse of the backs of two seated men, in dirty bath-wraps, bending over their make-up table without a word passing. The electric bulb burns above their heads, anaemically pink in the radiant light of three o'clock in the afternoon.

A shrill note, a prolonged piercing cry, rises up to us from the depths of the theatre. This means that there really is at this very moment down there on the stage a rigidly corsetted woman, swathed in the long, tight-fitting dress so dear to lady novelists, who has achieved the miracle of smiling, singing, and reaching the gods with her high-pitched C, that makes my parched tongue thirst for slices of lemon, for unripe gooseberries, for all things acid, fresh and green.

What a sigh answers mine from a near-by dressing-room, such a tragic sigh, almost a sob! Surely it must come from that chit of a girl barely recovered from a bout of bronchial-fever, the fragile little ballad-singer, exhausted by this savage heat, who peeps herself up by drinking iced absinthes.

My cold-cream is unrecognisable, reduced to cloudy oil that

smells of petrol. A melted paste, the colour of rancid butter, is all that remains of my white grease-foundation. The liquefied contents of my rouge-jar might well be used "to colour", as cooks say, a dish of "*Pêches Cardinal*".

For better or worse, here I am at last anointed with these multicoloured fats, and heavily powdered. I still have time, before our mimodrama, to survey a face on which glow, in the sunshine, the mixed hues of purple petunia, begonia and the afternoon blue of a morning glory. But the energy to move, walk, dance and mime, where can I hope to find that?

The sun has sunk a little, releasing one of my windows which I hasten to fling open; but the sill burns my hands, and the narrow mews below reeks of rotting melons and unwatered gutters. Two hatless women have pitched their chairs in the middle of the street and stare up at the powdery sky, like animals about to be drowned.

A hesitant step slowly mounts the stairs. I turn round at the moment when a frail little dancer dressed as a Red Indian reaches our landing: she is quite pale despite her make-up, and her temples are black with sweat. We look at each other without uttering a word. Then she lifts towards me the hem of her embroidered costume, weighted down with glass beads, strips of leather, metal and pearls, and murmurs as she goes back to her dressing-room, "And with all these trappings it must weigh eighteen pounds!"

The call-bell is the only sound to break the silence. On my way down I pass stage-hands, half-stripped and mute. Girls of the Andalusian ballet cross the foyer in full costume, without any greeting other than a ferocious glance at the great mirror. Brague, suffering agonies under the black cloth of his short waistcoat and skin-tight Spanish trousers, whistles out of sheer vanity to show that he's "not going to snuff out like the others!" An enormously fat boy, round as a barrel in his inn-keeper's clothes, looks about to suffocate and terrifies me: supposing he were to die on the stage!

Somehow or other, the mysterious forces of discipline and musical rhythm, together with an arrogant and childish desire

to appear handsome, to appear strong, all combine to lead us on. To be truthful, we perform exactly as we always do! The prostrated public, invisible in the darkened auditorium, notices nothing that it should not, the short breaths that parch our lungs, the perspiration that soaks us and stains our silk costumes, the moustache of sweat and drying powder that so tactlessly gives me a virile upper lip. Nor must it notice the exhausted expression on its favourite comic's face, the wild glint in his eyes as though he were ready to bite. Above all none must guess at the nervous repulsion that makes me shrink back at touching and feeling only damp hands, arms, cheeks or necks! Damp sleeves, glued hair, sticky tumblers, handkerchiefs like sponges—everything is moist or wringing wet, myself included.

Once the curtain has fallen we separate hastily, somehow ashamed of being the wretched, steaming flock we are. We hurry on down to the street, yearning for the dry dusty evening, towards the illusion of coolness shed by the already high-riding moon, fully visible, yet warm and lustreless.

The Starveling

In the first act of the play in which we are touring he takes the part of a profligate; whereas, in the third, he is transformed by a red wig and a neat white apron into a waiter.

When the time comes to catch our train, at dawn or late at night—for this is a strenuous tour, playing thirty-three towns in thirty-three days—he never fails to arrive late and in a rush, so that all I knew of him was a slim figure with his overcoat flying, agitated beyond measure by his race against time. The manager and my companions would wave their arms and shout at him.

“Come on, Gonzalez, for God's sake! One of these days you'll miss it for good!”

He would float into the gaping second-class carriage as on the wings of a whirlwind, so that I never had time to see his face.

Then, the other day, on the station at Nîmes, when I suddenly exclaimed, "There's a scent of hyacinths! Who smells of hyacinths?" with a polite, restrained little gesture he turned to offer me the nosegay that adorned his buttonhole.

Since that day I have taken more notice of him and, like the others, I raise my arms in despair when he arrives late, shouting in chorus: "Come on Gonzalez, for God's sake!" and I even recognise his face.

A sallow little face, so biliously pale that one imagines his "foundation-make-up" has penetrated his skin. A face all bumps and hollows, cheek-bones protruding above deep-sunk cheeks, the eyebrows too thick, the mouth thin above an obstinate chin.

But why, I wonder, does he never remove his overcoat that is faded near the shoulders from last year's sun and rain? A glance at his shoes provides the answer. Gonzalez exposes to the daylight, and my inspection, unspeakably shoddy footwear, the cracks and crevices of their once gleaming patent-leather only aggravated by the cheap polish of third-rate inns. His shoes lead my thoughts to his trousers, ever mysterious under the ample folds of his overcoat, and to his shirt-collar, mercifully all but hidden behind an amazing black cravat wound thrice round his neck.

His clumsily mended cotton gloves refute any illusion I may have that this little comedian affects the "showing-off-indifference" of a young bohemian, for they spell destitution. Once again I am confronted with genuine poverty. When, if ever, shall I cease to find it? Now I pay real attention to this boy, wait for his breathless arrival, notice that he does not smoke, carries no umbrella, that his suitcase is falling to pieces and that he discreetly watches for the moment when he can pick up the daily paper after I have read it through and dropped it.

Warned by some bashful instinct, he in his turn now takes notice of me. He openly smiles at me, and presses in his warm skinny hand the fingers I extend towards him; yet he is careful,

a moment later, to vanish and make himself as scarce as possible. He never joins us when we lunch in station buffets, and I cannot remember having seen Gonzalez at the same table as the less moneyed of our good companions for the "light meal at one franc fifty". Once he performed his disappearing act at Tarascon, whilst we were devouring an omelet cooked in oil, tepid veal and colourless chicken. He came back when the acorn-flavoured coffee was being served; he came back spare, gay, carefree—"I've been to have a look at the neighbourhood"—a pink carnation in his mouth and croissant-crumbs in the folds of his clothes.

I confess I'm worried about this boy; I don't dare to make further enquiries. I set childish traps for him.

"Will you have some coffee, Gonzalez?"

"Thanks, but it's forbidden me. Nerves . . . you know."

"That's not nice of you! The round's on me today. You surely won't be the only one to refuse?"

"Oh, well, if you make it a question of comradeship. . . ."

Another day, at Lourdes, I bought two dozen little hot sausages.

"Come on, children, don't let them get cold! Buck up Gonzalez, or you'll miss the lot! Snatch those two quickly, before Hautefeuille pounces on them: he's quite fat enough as it is."

I watched him eat, with the sneaking curiosity of one expecting that some movement on his part, a famished sigh, might betray his ill-satisfied hunger. Finally I decided to put a casual question to our manager.

"How much is Martineau getting nowadays? And that thing-gummy over there, young Gonzalez?"

"Martineau is paid fifteen francs, because he plays in the curtain-raiser as well as the main piece. Gonzalez gets only twelve francs a night—we're not on a Grand Duke's tour!"

Twelve francs. . . . Let's see how I reckon his expenses! He sleeps in joints at one fifty to two francs per night. Ten per cent for valeting, a problematical *café-au-lait*, but count two meals at two fifty for the price of one. Let's add another franc and a half for trams and buses . . . plus the gentlemen's flowered but-

tonholes! Well then, this young man can live within it, he can exist quite comfortably. I felt relieved and in the evening, during the interval, I shook his hand as if he'd just inherited a fortune! Taking courage from the semi-darkness and the fact that our faces were disguised by make-up, he allowed an anxious cry to escape his lips.

"It's drawing to a close, eh! Only thirteen more days! Oh for a tour that would last a whole life-time! How I dream of it!"

"You like your work as much as that?"

He shrugged his shoulders: "My work, my work! Naturally, I rather like it, but it's given me plenty of worries for my run. . . . Besides, thirty-three days, it's short. . . ."

"What d'you mean, short?"

"Short for what I want to do! Now, listen. . . ."

He suddenly sat down beside me, on a dusty garden-bench used for the last act, began to talk, began feverishly to tell me the story of his life.

"Now listen. . . . I can really talk to you, can't I? You've been kind . . . a real good companion to me. I have to take back two hundred francs."

"Take back where?"

"To Paris . . . if I want to eat during the coming month, and the one after. I can't face going through all that I've endured a second time, my health won't stand it."

"You've been ill?"

"Ill, if you like. Being broke is a damned illness."

With a professional gesture he ran his forefingers along his false moustache, which is in the habit of getting unstuck, and averted his blue-rimmed sunken eyes.

"There's no shame in admitting it. I played the fool, left my father, who is a book-binder, to get into the theatre. That was two years ago. My father cursed me, then . . ."

"What d'you mean? Your father has . . ."

". . . Cursed me." Gonzalez repeated, with theatrical simplicity. "Cursed me, gave me a proper cursing. I found work with the Grenelle-les-Gobelins company. That's when I started not eating enough. When summer came, I hadn't a sou in my

pocket. For six months I lived on the twenty-five francs a month an aunt of mine let me have . . . secretly."

"Good Lord! Twenty-five francs! How did you manage?"

He laughed, in a rather mad way, gazing straight in front of him.

"I don't know. It's plain murder, I don't know now how I got along. I no longer remember very clearly. My mind went blank. I remember I had a suit, one shirt, one collar, no change of anything. . . . The rest I've forgotten."

He was silent for a moment while he extended both legs with care, to ease his already threadbare trousers over his knee joints.

"Then after that I had a few weeks in the *Fantaisies Parisiennes*, at the Comédie Mondaine. But the going was bad. You need a stomach for that and I no longer have one. The pay's so miserably small. I've got no name, no clothes, no craft outside the theatre, no savings. I can't see myself making old bones!"

He laughed again, just as the spot-light came on, throwing into sharp relief his fleshless head, his hard cheek-bones, the dark sockets of his eyes, and the too wide slit of his mouth, for the lips were swallowed up by the contraction of his laughter.

"So, you see then, I have to take back two hundred and twenty francs. With that sum I'm safe for two months, at least. This tour was like winning a prize in a lottery, I can tell you. . . . Have I bored you stiff with my stories?"

I had no time to answer him: the stage-bell started to ring above our heads, and Gonzalez, incurably late, fluttered off to his dressing-room with all the lightness of a dead leaf, with the airy macabre grace of a young skeleton, dancing.

Love

Because she is fair-haired and young, a rather skinny girl with huge blue eyes, she fulfils exactly all the requirements we expect of a "little English dancer". She speaks some French, with all

the vigour of a young duckling, and to articulate these few words of our language she expends a useless energy which brings a flush to her cheeks and makes her eyes sparkle.

When she emerges from the dressing-room she shares with her companions next to mine, and walks down towards the stage, ready made-up and in costume, I can't distinguish her from the other girls, for she strives, as is most fitting, to be just an impersonal and attractive little English dancer in a Revue! When the first girl comes out, followed by the second, and the third, then the others up to the ninth, they all greet me, as they pass, with the same happy smile, a similar nod of the head that sets their pinkish-blond false curls bobbing in the same way. The nine faces are painted with identical make-up, cleverly tinted with mauve around the eyes, while the lids are burdened, on each of their lashes, with such a heavy touch of mascara, that it is impossible to distinguish the true colour of the pupil.

But when they leave, at ten past midnight, having hastily wiped their cheeks with the corner of a towel and re-powdered them chalky white, their eyes still barbarously enlarged, or when they come to rehearse in the afternoon, punctually at one o'clock, I immediately recognise little Gloria, a genuine blonde, with two puffs of frizzy hair tied round the temples with a strip of black velvet inside her hideous hat like a bird nesting in an old basket. Her upper lip protrudes a little from two pointed canines, and this makes her look, in repose, as if she were sucking a white sugared almond.

I don't know why I noticed her. She is not as pretty as Daisy, that dark-haired demon, always in tears or in a rage, who dances with devilish gusto and then escapes to the top of the staircase, whence she spits out objectionable English expletives. She is less attractive than the awful Edith, who exaggerates her accent to raise a laugh and, with assumed candour, utters French indecencies, well aware of their meaning.

Yet Gloria, who is dancing for the first time in France, compels my attention. She is sweet and touching, in an anonymous way. She has never called the ballet-master "damned fool", and her

name never appears on the board where the list of fines are posted. Admittedly, she shrieks when she runs up or down the two flights of steps leading to the stage; but she shrieks like the others, instinctively, and because a bunch of English girls, who change their costumes four times between nine o'clock and midnight, cannot run up and down staircases without yelling like Red Indians or singing inordinately loud. Gloria, therefore, lets her comically youthful falsetto mingle with the inevitable hubbub and she equally well holds her own in the girls' common dressing-room, separated from mine by a rickety wooden partition.

These travelling show-girls have turned their rectangular closet into a real gipsy encampment. Red and black cosmetic pencils roll all over their make-up table, covered at one end with brown paper and at the other with a tattered old towel. The slightest draught would blow away the postcards fastened to the walls with pins stuck in at a slant. The jar of rouge, the Leichner eye-brow pencil, the woollen powder puff, could all be carried away in a knotted kerchief, and these little girls, off and away in a couple of months, will leave fewer traces of their passage here than would a troop of wandering Romanies, whose halting place is marked by round patches of singed grass and the flaky ashes of fires kindled with stolen wood.

"... 'k you," says Gloria in an educated voice.

"The pleasure is mine," our good companion Marcel politely replies. Though billed as a tenor, he may well be dancing this coming month or even performing in a drama at the Gobelins or in a Revue at Montrouge.

As if by mere chance, Marcel waits on the landing for the return of the noisy flock of English show girls. By apparent chance, too, Gloria comes up last and lingers for a moment, time enough to fumble with awkward grace in the paper-bag of lemon-drops our good companion offers her.

I take careful note of the slow progress of this idyll. He is young, famished, ardent, firmly determined not to "break down", and looks—in spite of his well-worn tails and artificial lily-of-the-

valley buttonhole—like a handsome, crafty working-class boy. But Gloria's strange foreign manners baffle him. With a French chum, a little Paris music-hall sparrow, he would already know where he stood—things work, or they don't—but he simply can't fathom this funny *anglishe*. She may rush off the stage, dishevelled and yelling, hastily unhooking her dress, yet when she reaches the landing she pulls herself together, straightens her face to accept and acknowledge the proffered sweet with the dignified “. . . 'k you” of a young lady in full evening dress.

She attracts him. She irritates him too. Sometimes he shrugs his shoulders as he watches her walk away, but I can feel that it is at himself he is poking fun. The other day he chucked into Gloria's large hat, held dangling by its ribbons, half a dozen tangerines, seized on at once by the horde of blonde savages, who snatched at them with triumphant shrieks, loud laughter and sharp nails.

This long flirtation exasperates the impatient French boy, lively and inconstant, whereas Gloria revels in its protraction. She now calls Marcel by his name: *Mâss'l*, and has given him a picture postcard of herself. Not the one in which she is dressed as a toddler with a hoop, nor that on which she is disguised as a “Poulbot kid,” with a hole in her pants—oh no!—but the loveliest of all, presenting Gloria as a Medieval Lady wearing a high headdress, a quasi-regal Gloria.

They don't seem worried at being unable to talk to each other. With subtle shrewdness the boy sets out to be assiduous and unassuming. Have I not seen him kiss a thin little hand, one that was not withdrawn, a bony little paw, chapped by cold water and liquid white! But, on the sly, he looks at Gloria with indiscreet persistence, as if he were choosing in advance the proper place to implant a kiss. Once behind the closed door of the dressing-room, she sings for him, then shouts his name “*Mâss'l*”, as if she were throwing him flowers.

In short, things go well: even too well. . . . This quasi-mute idyll unfurls like a mimodrama, with no other music than Gloria's exuberant voice and no words but the name *Mâss'l*.

diversified by love's numberless inflexions. After the first radiant *Mâss'ls*, shouted on a slightly nasal note, I have heard lower *Mâss'ls*, provocative and tender, exacting too—and then, one fine day, came a tremulous *Mâss'l*, so low that it sounded like an entreaty.

Tonight, I fear, I am hearing it for the last time. At the head of the staircase, hovering on its top step, I find a forlorn little Gloria, with a distorted wig, crying humbly, all over her make-up, and repeating under her breath "*Mâss'l*" . . . "*Mâss'l* . . ."

The Hard Worker

"Your arms, Hélène! Your arm control! That's the second time your hand has struck your head while you're dancing! I've told you again and again, my girl: the arms must curve like handles above your head, as if you were balancing a basket of flowers!"

Hélène answers with a sullen out-of-patience look only, and corrects the position of her arms. She's ready to launch forth again on the studio floor—a well-worn shiny parquet-floor, battered by the raps of heels and the ballet-master's wand—when she changes her mind, and cries out: "Are you still there, Robert?"

"Of course," replies a submissive voice from the other side of the door.

"Supposing you took the car and popped over to the furrier's and told him I won't be coming till tomorrow?"

No answer; but I hear the tap, tap of a walking stick and the sound of the front door being closed: "Robert" has gone.

"So much the better!" murmurs Hélène in a softened voice. "It exasperates me to feel he's there waiting for me and doing nothing."

Twice a week I sit through the last minutes of Hélène Gromet's dancing lesson: she is put through her paces from four to five, just before my own turn comes. She treats me more as a col-

league than a friendly companion, much as if we were workers in the same factory; by which I mean that we talk little but seriously, and that sometimes she reveals her feelings with the same cool candour as when confiding in her masseuse or her pedicure.

Hélène is not a real dancer, but a "little piece who dances". She made her music-hall *début* last season, in *Revue*, and, as her first attempt, she "flung" at her audience two scabrous little ditties, putting them across at the top of her brand new, unsophisticated, brassy voice, without any of the simperings of false modesty, but with a perfectly straight face, and with an aggressive innocence that enchanted. Substantial offers of work, a no less substantial "friend", two motor-cars, a string of pearls and a mink coat, were all showered on Hélène in one single stroke of luck—but her steady little head never wavered. She boasts of being a "hard worker", and sticks to her ungainly, plebeian name.

"Do you imagine I'm going to re-christen myself? A simple name, not too pretty, that's what puts you straight into the top class. Look at Badet and Bordin!"

All her entries amount to a miniature apotheosis. The subdued thunder of a motor-car heralds her approach, then she appears, weighed down under ermine and velvet, a trembling cloud of osprey feathers in her hat. A decisive and carefully devised make-up standardises her youthful face under a mask of dead white powder, with pink touches on the cheeks and chin. Her blued eyelids carry a heavy double fringe of lashes, stiff with mascara, and her teeth shine almost woundingly against the purplish lipstick that outlines her mouth.

"I know I'm young enough to do without all that muck," Hélène explains, "but it's now part of my array, and it's useful too. For like this I am made up for life. I'll have nothing to add when I'm twenty years older. Under this coating I can afford to look ill or to have tired eyes; it's as practical as a disguise. For you'd better know, I do nothing without good reason."

This young utilitarian scares me. She takes her lesson as she would swallow a glass of cod-liver oil: conscientiously, and to

the bitter end. Nevertheless it is a pleasure to watch her exercise, flexible and well balanced on her clever legs. She is pretty, and touchingly young. What then does she lack? For she does lack something.

"Your smile, Hélène, your smile!" exclaims the ballet-mistress. "Don't put on your cashier's face. You don't seem to realise that you're dancing, my child."

The former ballerina's broad and blotched face endeavours in vain to teach Hélène that the lips must part to disclose the teeth, while the corners of the mouth must curve upwards like the horns of a crescent moon. And I can't help laughing at the commercial composure of the pupil, as she faces her grinning teacher with a thoughtful brow and a rigid, painted mouth.

What are the thoughts of this obstinate child, this insensitive bee? She often repeats: "When one wants to get *somewhere* . . ." Get somewhere, but where? What suspended mirage keeps her eyes uplifted when she seems to look through me, through the walls, through the submissive features of her admiring young "friend"?

She is tense, and appears to aim relentlessly at some concealed goal. Glory? no . . . those who seek glory admit it, and I have never heard Hélène Gromet express a desire for glamorous parts or proudly say "When I can rival Simone . . ." Money! That sounds more likely. At the finish of a lively lesson, like today's, it is from her fatigue that I best discover in Hélène the solid little "child of the people", eager to earn and to hoard.

She bears her fatigue with the air of graceful fulfilment, the happily satisfied expression of a young washerwoman who has just put down her load of freshly laundered linen. Scantly clothed in a damp under-slip and a tiny pair of silk knickers, she comes to sit beside me on the side-bench. She has crossed her legs and remains silent, one shoulder hunched, while her bare arms hang limp.

As the twilight deepens, the black undulations of her hair seem tinged with a deeper blue.

My imagination conjures up somewhere, in some poor place, Hélène's mama who, returning at this same hour from the

trough by the river, lets her reddened arms hang loose in just the same way: or a sister, or a brother, who has just left a workshop or a stuffy office. They too are punctual, and bent, and temporarily weary, like Hélène.

She rests a while before re-doing her face, with the aid of a fat powder puff and a small pad of rouged cotton-wool. With the trusting calm of a drowsy animal she allows me to see on her dark-skinned undressed face the tawniness and slightly coarse grain that most common mortals ignore. In a moment or two a surfeit of powder will blur the sharply arched curve of her imperious nose, not unlike that of a bird of prey.

The return of "Robert" brings her to her feet, and immediately puts her on the defensive. Yet he is only a fair-haired rather humble boy, eager to wait on her and help her to dress, fastening the shiny straps of her little shoes and pulling the long pink lace of her stays. The pair of them together barely miss making an enchanting picture.

I can see she does not hate him, but I cannot see that she loves him either. The attention she grants him shows no subservience. When they leave together, she takes full stock of him with that penetrating, antagonistic look of hers, as if he were yet another lesson to be learned. And I feel, at times, very much like seizing this avaricious child's arm and asking her: "But, Hélène, what about Love?"

After Midnight

"How nice it is here."

The little dancer rubs her bare arms, the rather red, coarse-skinned arms of an undernourished blonde, and breathes in the hot dry air of the restaurant as if it were ozone.

On a polished strip of linoleum in the centre of the big dining-room a few couples are already revolving, among them a girl from Normandy in the lace headdress of the Caux district, a

painted hussy with a red silk scarf, an Egyptian dancing girl, and a curly-headed baby wearing a tartan sash. This establishment, highly rated on the Riviera, employs some dozen dance hostesses and as many singers.

Little Maud comes on here from the Eldorado, where she croons and gambols through an "English Number". She has just arrived, after running all the way through an icy wind, to earn her twenty francs pittance at the "Restaurant of the Good Hostess", from midnight till six in the morning.

She flexes her knee joints a little as she leans against the wall, and, after a rough calculation of her dancing at both performances at the Eldorado, and now waltzing here till dawn, finds it amounts to seven hours of valse and cake-walk, not counting dressing and undressing, rubbing on and removing her make-up. She was hungry enough when she arrived, but her appetite has been stayed by a glass of beer gulped down in the artistes' room. 'So much the better,' she reflects, 'I've not got to get fat.'

Maud's attraction lies in her angular girlish slimness; she is labelled English because of her fair hair, reddish elbows, and her funny little tippler's nose, blotchy round the nostrils. She has acquired a vicious little smile, and learned to shake her schoolgirl locks and hide her face behind her square-fingered paws, chapped by liquid white, at any suggestion of a risky joke. In private life she is simply a "Caf'-Con'" girl like any of the others, overworked, innocent of malice or coquetry, for ever on the move from hotel to train, from station to theatre, ever tormented by hunger, lack of sleep, and the morrow's insecurity.

For the time being she takes a rest on her feet, like a saleswoman in a big store, and keeps worrying a recent hole in her flesh-tinted tights with her big toe. 'Five francs for invisible mending!'

One hand absent-mindedly smooths the creases in the hem of her babyish satin frock, once Nile green, now yellow. 'Dry-cleaning, ten francs. Hell, that eats up my night's earnings! If only that tipsy little lady would come back, the one who was here the night of the masked ball, and threw me the change from her bill!'

A violinist in an embroidered Roumanian shirt plays *You once vowed to be mine* with such amorous intensity that he is smothered in encores.

'So much the better,' she says to herself once more. 'How I wish he'd play all night long, for then I'd be living on unearned income!'

Her fond hopes are dashed. A wink from the manager orders her to waltz, clinging to the shoulders of a sham toreador, thin and willowy and far too tall for her. Maud is so tired by this time that she waltzes without being aware of it, hanging on to the youth who clasps her to him with professional, almost indecent unconcern. Everything swirls about her. The head of a hat-pin, the clasp of a necklace, the setting of a ring, pierce her eyes as she dances round. The polished floor glides under her feet, glistening, soapy, as if wet.

'If I go on waltzing for very long tonight,' she muses in a daze, 'I'll end up without a thought in my head.'

She shuts her eyes and abandons herself to her partner's insensitive breast, throwing herself into the whirl with the trustful semi-consciousness of a child ready to drown. But the music stops suddenly, and the toreador lets his charge drop without a glance, without a word, like flotsam, on the nearest table.

Maud smiles, passes a hand across her forehead, and looks around. 'Ah, there's my "sympathetic couple".' For, every night, she picks out among those supping at The Good Hostess a couple who catch her fancy—in all innocence—and on whom she lavishes her most childish smiles, occasionally blowing them a kiss, or throwing them a flower; a couple whose departure brings her a short pang of regret, when she watches the woman rise to go with the air of regal boredom befitting one who knows she is being followed by an enamoured escort.

'How sweet they are this evening, my sympathetic couple!'

Sweet . . . in a way. Maud chooses to see things in that way. A restless, vindictive desire seems to possess the man, who is very young and can barely conceal his impatience. His eyes are bright and shifty, and so constantly changing in colour that they turn pale more often than his tanned face. He eats hurriedly, as if

he had a train to catch. When his glance catches his companion's, he throws his head back as if a bunch of too fragrant flowers had touched his nostrils.

She had arrived looking happy and self-assured, stimulated by the cold outside and a hearty appetite. She had clasped her hands under her chin and then asked the violinist in the embroidered shirt to play waltzes, more waltzes, and still more waltzes. He played for her *You once vowed to be mine. . . . Now you will never know! . . . Your heart was cruel.*

"Oh, how I adore that music!" she had sighed aloud.

She had smiled at Maud as she whirled past. And then she had fallen silent, gazing intently at her companion. "Leave me alone," she told him, pulling away the hand he was stroking.

'They're sweet, but they seem to quarrel without a word passing,' Maud observes. 'They may be in love, but they're not true friends.'

Now the woman is leaning back in her chair, never taking her eyes off the ferocious eater facing her. Maud is fascinated by the woman's slender, feverish face, as though something were soon about to happen. The manager clacks his tongue to no purpose, in his attempt to recall the little dancer to her duty; Maud lingers on, bound by some mysterious telepathy to the woman who sits there, speechless, separated from her friend by gulfs of music, drifting further from him, perhaps, at every throbbing note of the violin, with despairing clairvoyance.

'They love each other, but they're ill at ease in each other's company.' Such devotion wells up in the woman's dark glances, yet she remains obstinately silent as though fearful of bursting into tears or unburdening her heart in a flood of banal complaints. Her eyes are beautiful, eloquent and frightened, and seem to be telling the man: 'You're a clumsy lover. . . . You don't begin to understand me. . . . I don't really know you, and you scare me. . . . You sneer at everything I like. . . . You lie so well! . . . You possess me completely, yet I can't trust you. . . . If you knew what limpid strings you wall up within me because I fear you! What am I doing here at your side? Would that this music could free me of you for ever! Or else

that this violin would stop before I find out any more about you! You yearn for my undoing, not my happiness, and what is worst in me assures you of your victory.'

Maud sighs 'Oh, what an ill assorted pair they are this evening! She ought to leave him, but . . .'

"Come along," the man murmurs as he stands up.

His companion rises to her feet, tall, black and glittering, like an obedient serpent, under the threat of his two bright eyes, so caressing, so treacherous. Defenceless, she follows him, with no support other than the sisterly smile of a little blonde dancer, who inwardly regrets the exit of her "sympathetic couple" and whose pout seems to indicate a reproachful "Already?"

"Lola"

From my dressing-room I could hear, every night, the tap-tap of heavy crutches on the iron steps leading up to the stage.

Yet there was no "Cripple's Number" on our programme. I used to open my door to watch the midget pony climbing the stairs on its nimble unshod feet. The white donkey followed clip-cloping behind, then the piebald Great Dane on its thick soft paws, then the beige poodle and the fox terriers.

Bringing up the rear, the plump Viennese lady in charge of the "Miniature Circus" would herself supervise the ascent of the tiny brown bear, always reluctant and somehow desperate, clutching at the bannisters and moaning as he mounted, like a punished child being sent up to bed. Two monkeys followed, in flounced silk sprinkled with sequins, smelling like an ill-kept chicken run. All of them climbed with stifled sighs, subdued groans and inaudible expletives; they were on their way up to await their daily hour's work.

I never again wished to see them up there, under full control and tame; the sight of their submissiveness had become intolerable to me. I knew too well that the martingaled pony tried

in vain to toss its head and constantly pawed with one of its front legs, in a sort of ataxic jerk. I knew that the ailing, melancholic monkey would close its eyes and let its head rest in childish despair on its companion's shoulder; that the stupid Great Dane would stare into vacancy, gloomy and rigid, while the old poodle would wag its tail with senile benevolence; above all I knew that the pathetic little brown bear would seize its head in both paws, whimpering and almost in tears, because a very narrow strap fastened round its muzzle cut into its lip.

I should have liked to forget the entire misery-stricken group, in their white leather harness hung with jingle-bells and adorned with ribbons and bows, forget their slavering jaws, the rasping breath of these starved animals; I never again wanted to witness, and pity, this dumb animal distress I could do nothing to alleviate. So I remained down below, with Lola.

Lola did not come to visit me straight away. She waited until the sounds of the laborious ascent had died away, till the last fox-terrier had whisked its rump, white as a rabbit's scut, round the angle of the stairs. Only then did she push my half-open door with her long insinuating nose.

She was so white that her presence lit up my sordid dressing-room. A slim, elongated greyhound body, white as snow; her neck, her leg joints, her flanks and tail, bristled with fine silver; her fleecy coat shone like spun glass. She walked in and looked up at me with eyes of orange melting into brown, a colour so rare that it alone was enough to touch my heart. Her tongue hung out a little, pink and dry, and she panted gently from thirst. . . . "Give me a drink. Give me a drink, though I know it's forbidden. My companions up there are thirsty too, none of us are allowed to drink before working time. But you'll give me a drink."

She lapped up the luke-warm water I poured into an enamelled basin I had first rinsed out for her. She lapped it with an elegance that appeared, as did all her movements, to be an affectation and, in front of her, I felt ashamed of the chipped rim of the basin, of the dented jug, of the greasy walls she took good care to avoid.

While she drank I looked at her little winglike ears, at her legs, slender and firm as a hind's; at her fleshless ribs and beautiful nails, white as her coat.

Her thirst quenched, she turned away her coy tapering muzzle from the basin, and for a little while longer gazed at me with a look in which I could read nothing but vague anxiety, a sort of wild animal prayer. After that she went up by herself to the stage, where her performance was limited, it must be added, to an honorary appearance, to jumping a few obstacles which she took with accomplished grace, with a lazy, concealed strength. The footlights heightened the gold in her eyes, and she answered each crack of the whip with a nervous grimace, a menacing smile which disclosed the pink of her gums and her faultless teeth.

For nearly a month she begged no more of me than lukewarm, insipid water from a chipped basin. Every evening I used to say to her, but not in words, "Take it, though I am pining to give you all that is your due. For you have recognised me and deemed me worthy of quenching your thirst, you, who speak to no one, not even to the Viennese lady whose podgy, masterful hands fasten a blue collar round your serpent neck."

On the twenty-ninth day, sorrowfully, I kissed her flat silky forehead, and on the thirtieth . . . I bought her.

"Beautiful, but not a brain in her head," the Viennese lady confided to me. By way of a farewell, she chirped a few Austro-Hungarian endearments into Lola's ear, while the bitch stood beside me, serious, gazing straight in front of her, a hard look on her face, and squinting slightly. Whereupon I picked up her dangling leash and walked away, and the long brittle spindles, armed with ivory claws, fell into step behind me.

She escorted rather than followed me, and I held her chain high, so as not to inflict its weight on my captive princess. Would the ransom I had paid for her make her really mine?

Lola did not eat that day, and refused to drink the fresh water I offered her in a white bowl bought specially for her. But she languidly turned her undulating neck, her delicate feverish nose, toward the old chipped basin. Out of this she consented to drink,

and then looked up at me with her luminous eyes, sparkling with gold like some dazzling liqueur.

"I am not a fettered princess, but a bitch, a genuine bitch, with an honest bitch's heart. I'm not responsible for my too conspicuous beauty, which has aroused your possessive instincts. Is that the sole reason for your buying me? Is it for my silver coat, my prow-shaped chest, the curved arc of my body which seems to drink in the air, my taut brittle bones barely covered by my light sparse flesh? My gait delights you, and also the harmonious leap in which I appear both to jump over and crown an invisible portico, and you call me chained princess, chimera, lovely serpent, fairy steed. . . . Yet here you stand dumb-founded! I am only a bitch, with the heart of a bitch, proud, ill with suppressed tenderness and trembling for fear I may give myself too quickly. Yes, I am trembling, because you now have me, past redemption, for ever, in exchange for those few drops of water poured by your hand, every night, into the bottom of a chipped basin."

Moments of Stress

Is it today he'll kill himself?

There he goes, bunched on his bicycle, back humped like a snail, nose between his knees, swaying as he pedals on the revolving platform, struggling, as though in the teeth of a gale, against its centrifugal force.

The rimless tray spins beneath him, slowly at first, then faster, till it becomes at full speed a polished shimmering disk of watered silk, scored with concentric circles, like ripples when a pebble is dropped in a fountain. Upon its surface the small black figure astride two wheels pits his strength against the unceasing repulsion of the invisible force and, when he begins to falter, each lapse wrings from us one and all a similar strangled gasp.

The whole contraption sweeps round to the muffled roar of its motor; the deadly edges of the turn-table crackle with electric sparks, green and red; a siren maintains a shrill, agonising wail throughout the race.

Despite the spiralling blast that sweeps over the stage, we stay there, all of us, hidden in the wings; mute, competent mechanics in boiler suits; acrobats with their hair greased, their faces the pink of artificial flowers; small part actresses in hastily flung on faded kimonos, hair scraped back Chinese fashion under their filthy rubber "make-up bands". We stay there, all of us, glued to the spot by the hideous excitement of the unspoken query, "Is it today he'll ride to his death?"

No. It's all over now. The chromatic keening of the siren is silenced the moment the dizzy speed slackens to a standstill, and the black insect, after battling against odds gripped to the handle-bars, alights with an elastic leap on to the now motionless disk.

No, it won't be today he'll kill himself. Unless, of course, this evening. . . . For today is Sunday, and this is only the first house. Clearly, therefore, he still has the time to kill himself at the evening performance.

I would like to get out of this place. But outside rain is falling, the depressing, black and desolate rain of the south, which has turned a whole town—white in the sun yesterday the length of its sea front—into a yellow quagmire. Outside this place there is only the rain and the hotel bedroom. Those who travel without respite, those who wander in isolation, those who sit down in a small restaurant at a table laid with a single plate, a single glass, and prop their folded newspaper against the water jug, such persons know the periodic, regular recurrence of fits of mental despair, the disease bred of loneliness.

I would like to get away from here, but for the moment I lack the strength to carry out my wish or to imagine any place that might bring me comfort. To create such a place, or revive it in my memory, to liven it with a beloved face, with flowers, streams, domestic animals, is for the present too great an effort, but it may be granted me a little later, perhaps in an hour's time.

My mental inertia adapts itself to the physical lassitude which holds me here, faint-hearted and with sagging legs, querulously repeating to myself 'I would like to get away. . . .'

I fear, I expect some unknown tragedy. I am alarmed that the management has assembled here, for the perverse pleasure of an alien audience accustomed to view with indifference the spilling of the dark blood of bulls, so many dangerous or macabre "acts". A slight fever make my temples throb—journey-fatigue, change of climate, saline humidity?—transmagnifying, perhaps, familiar, almost friendly scenery into the trappings of a romantic nightmare. Tonight my peculiar mood isolates me from my bespangled and needy brethren who bustle about all round me; myself invisible, I watch their act from a sort of elevated quay, round which runs an iron balcony connecting the dressing-rooms and overlooking the stage.

A red demon has just this moment sprung from a trap-door and I can hear the laughs he raises among the distant public by his little pointed red beard and forked eyebrows, indeed by his entire mask, modelled in thick plaster and heavily black pencilled.

But the man has begun his labours as a contortionist, a slow, serpentine dislocation, the unscrewing of each articulation, a double-jointed entanglement of every limb knit into an involved, uncanny pattern, and from up here I can see why it is he hides his features beneath those of a laughable demon: his self-inflicted tortures are such that at times his face refuses to obey him and really does become that of a man condemned to everlasting flames. Will he succumb, like a reptile strangled by its own coils? What is more, he is my side of the orchestra, and the music fails to drown his frequent moans, the brief involuntary moans of a man being slowly crushed to death.

When at last he goes off and passes, limping, below me, dragging his long body that looks half drained of its strength, I expand my constricted chest, I want to breathe. I trust this is the last of those brief horrors, I long for some insipid flowery ballet . . . but already the rifles are being levelled at their target, an ace of clubs held aloft in the hand of a trusting child.

I cannot endure the sight of this small hand, and in my morbid state I imagine its palm pierced by a red hole. Yet even so I remain, I even approach a little closer, returning to cower behind a stay, fascinated by a flight of navaja blades hurled at lightning speed by a knife-thrower. The man seems hardly to move, a flash of blue steel darts from his fist to penetrate, vibrating, a vertical board and are to be seen planted close against the temples of a youth, who wears a fixed smile and never bats an eyelid.

I myself blink as each blade passes and, each time, I lower my head. A scream from the audience, the cry of a frightened woman, finally shatters my nerves, but the youth is still there, and alive, smiling and petrified. Nothing has happened; he is alive, alive! Nothing has happened but the suspension, no doubt, the temporary indecision—for an immeasurably short instant—of whatever was hovering over this theatre. A sovereign wing, one that did not deign to descend today, has spared the man on the revolving table, spared the tortured neck of the red demon. It has not chosen to divert from their mark the bullets aimed at the ace of clubs held on high by a frail hand. Yet, for a split second, it remained poised, capriciously, above the head of the youthful Saint Sebastian who is smiling, down there, his brow haloed with knives.

Now it has resumed its flight. Will it fly far from us, this Fate whose invisible presence has so painfully oppressed me and left me with so trembling a soul, pusillanimous and greedy for horrors, the soul of a theatre-addict?

Journey's End

“Well I never! Who’d ’ave thought our paths would ever cross again! How long is it now since I last set eyes on you! Why, Marseilles of course, remember? You were on tour with the Pitard Company, and I with the Dubois. We both played the same night. It was up to our lot not to be done down by yours,

and vice versa. That didn't stop us going out to have a bite together that night, shell fish, eh! on the terrace, at Basso's.

". . . No, you've not changed much, I must say. You've looked after number one all right; you're lucky! Your digestion's been your saving, but if you've got thirteen years of touring in your system, like me, you wouldn't be looking so nifty!

"Yes, go ahead, you can tell me I've changed! At forty-six, it's a bit hard having to play duenna parts, when there are so many skittish youngsters of fifty and sixty to be seen footling about in juvenile leads on the Grands Boulevards, who'll throw up their parts, as likely as not, if there's a brat of over twelve in the cast! It was Saigon knocked me out, and long before my time too. I sang in operetta at Saigon, I did, in a theatre lit by eight hundred oil lamps!

". . . And what else? Well, apart from that, there's not much to tell. I go on 'touring', like so many others. I keep saying I've had enough of it, and this'll be the last time I'll do it; I go on saying to all who'll listen that I'd rather be a theatre attendant or travel in perfumery. So what? Here I am back again with Pitard, and you're back with Pitard too. We came back to find work, and it's noses to the grindstone once again.

". . . I don't need you to tell me that prices have dropped all round. If it got about what I'm working for this time, my reputation would be gone. It really seems as if they think we don't need to eat when on tour.

"Not to mention that I've got my sister with me, you know. It may make two on the pay-roll but it means two mouths to feed. Oh, she's taken to the life right enough, the poor kid; she's got guts! More guts than health, if you ask me! She'll tackle any part. Take the time when we had a fifty-day contract with the Miral Touring Company, in a mixed bill of three plays nightly: the child took the part of the maid who lays the table in the first—ten lines; then an old peasant woman who tells everyone a few home truths—two hundred lines; and to end up, a girl of seventeen married off against her will who never stops crying throughout. Just think of the poor thing having to cope with all those changes of make-up!

"And for starvation fees, too, I'd have you know! On top of that we had the doctor's and chemist's bills to pay—it was the winter my bronchitis was so bad—not to mention the nurse's charge for cupping, thirty-seven francs worth! I went on rehearsing with forty cups on my back and so hid the fact I was suffering. When I was seized by a fit of coughing, I rushed off to the lav, otherwise they'd have replaced me within the hour, you bet!

"I was able to get away, but doctors and their drugs had ruined me in advance. It was then the child began to knit woollen garments, you know, those loose coatees that are fashionable just now, with a little woollen jumper to match. She works when we're travelling, on the train; she's got the knack of it. When we're in for a journey, eight or nine hours by rail, she'll reel off a coatee in four days and post it off at once to a firm in Paris.

". . . Yes, yes, I know, you've got the music-hall to keep you going. There's still a living to be made on the halls; but what d'you suppose there's left for me? They'll bury my bones on one of these tours and, believe me, I'm not the only one. . . . Oh, I'm not trying to plead constant illness, you know. I still have my good moments; I was happy-go-lucky enough when young! If only my liver let me alone for three weeks, or if my cough left off for a fortnight, or the blessed varicose veins didn't make my left leg weigh so heavy, then I'd be my old self again!

"If, granted that, I chanced on a few good companions, not too mangy a lot, but sporty, who don't spend their lives harping on their woes and retailing their maladies and confinements, then I promise you I'd soon get my fair share of fun again.

"Provided, of course, I'm not laid out like Marizot. . . . didn't you know? It wasn't in the papers, but the story might have come your way. We were . . . now, where were we? . . . in Belgium, in pouring rain. We'd just finished a passable dinner, that is, my sister and I, Marizot and Jacquard. Marizot goes out first, while we stay behind to settle the bill. You know how short-sighted he is. He misses his way, and off he goes down a dark narrow street, and there at the end was a stream, a river, I don't know, the Scheldt, or something: to be brief, he falls

into the water and gets carried away. They only found him two days later. It all happened so quick that the first night after, we hadn't even begun to feel sad, believe me! It wasn't till the next night, when the under-manager played Marizot's part, that we all began to get weepy and cried on the stage . . .

"Anyhow, people don't drown every day, thank God! We did find some consolation at the time of the railway strike. Yes, and it played us a most unusual trick. Listen to this: we ended up the tour with *Fiasco*—the devil of a title—and the night before we'd played it in Rouen. When we reach Mantes, the train stops. 'All change! Everyone to leave the train! We go no further!' The strike was on! Off I went to have a good moan. I had acute liver trouble, rheumatism in my left leg, a high temperature, the whole boiling. I sat down on a bench in the waiting-room, saying to myself, 'After a knock like this nothing will get me to budge again, my luck's right out, I'd rather die on the spot!' Jacquard was there, same as ever, with his big overcoat and his pipe, and he comes up to me and says 'Why don't you just go home. You'd better take the Pigalle-Halle-aux-vins bus, which drops you on your doorstep.'

"'Oh, leave me in peace!' I give him for answer. 'Have you no heart at all? Here we are, stuck for Lord knows how long by this filthy strike! D'you think I get much fun out of spending my miserable salary on drugs and digs, eh? I'd like you to be standing in my shoes and then see what you'd do in my place!'

"'In your place?' he says. 'In your place I'd take the Pigalle-Halle-aux-vins bus.'

"I could have cried with rage, dearie. I could have struck him, that Jacquard, with his pipe and his wooden mug! I flayed him alive with my tongue! When I'm finished, he takes me by the arm and forcibly leads me to the glass door. And what d'you suppose I see in the station yard? *Pigalle-Halle-aux-vins*, dearie! *Pigalle*, in so many words! Three Pigalle buses, that had been used to bring along another troupe that very morning! And there they were, having a soft drink, right in front of that station at Mantes!

"I started to giggle, not but what my liver was killing me, and

on I giggled till I thought I never would stop. And the best of it was that we went back to Paris in *Pigalle-Halle-aux-vins*, dearie, by the special authority of the sub-prefect. It cost us a bit more than two and a half francs, but what a time we all had! Jacquard and Marval sat on the top deck and threw down sausage skins to us inside, and you should have seen the faces of the 'by-standers'! That alone was worth the whole trip!

"And what a shaking we had, I felt as if my liver were being torn from my body at every jolt! It might well have been worse, for I laughed the whole length of the way, and that's always something to the good!

"And, when all's said and done, as Jacquard put it, 'What are speed and altitude records to the likes of us? Give me a nice little bus-ride *Mantes-Paris* on a *Pigalle-Halle-aux-vins* every time! There's an endurance test quite out of the ordinary!'"

"The Strike, O Lord, the Strike!"

Through half-closed eyes I follow the "Pavane" as danced by "The Great Concubines of History". Previous to wearing the pearly-veiled hennin, the starched ruff, the farthingale, the hooped panniers and knotted kerchief, they have, for the rehearsal, pinned up their skirts like loin-cloths about their hips, some even discarding their narrow dresses to work in black knickers, bare arms emerging from their brassieres, furry mob-caps on their heads.

They are led by the Roi-Soleil, in the guise of a ballet-master in shirt sleeves. Gabrielle d'Estrées and the Marquise de Pompadour persist in making mistake after mistake, and inwardly I bless them. They start over again from the beginning. If only they would go on making mistakes!

Seated in the orchestra stalls on a strip of grey dust-sheet, I am waiting in the darkened auditorium till the Revue rehearsal is over. It is now a quarter to six, my comrades have held the stage

since twelve-thirty. There'll only be three-quarters of an hour left to rehearse our mimodrama piece. But I long for Gabrielle d'Estrées and the Marquise de Pompadour to blunder again: I do so hate the thought of having to move.

The niggard gleam of a two-way "service lamp" acts as substitute for the footlights. These two points of light, hanging in the blackness, prick my eyes and induce sleep. Beside me, invisible, a fellow mime staves off his craving to smoke by chewing an unlit cigarette. "Another day's work ruined for the rest of us! I should like to see all Revue promoters deep in a hundred feet of . . . Just take a look at those "Great Concubines", I ask you! And to think that they're toiling away there for the price of air. . . . The strike, oh Lord, the strike!"

The word arouses me. Is the strike, then, a reality? We've been talking about it so much among ourselves. There's been some change of atmosphere in this hard-worked Café-Concert of ours, one of the happiest establishments in the district, always warm and packed to capacity, where, every night, the stormy laughter of the crowd rollicks round the house amid cat-calls, whistling and stamping of feet.

"The strike, oh Lord, the strike!"

It's in the thoughts of all, it's mooted in corners. The chorus girls of the forthcoming Revue, the little singing girls on tour, have this word only on their lips, each in her own manner. Some there are who shout in a whisper "The Strike—for paid matinées, and paid rehearsals!" their faces afire, brandishing a muff like a flag and a reticule like a sling.

Once again the "Great Concubines" have gone agley. Splendid, a further ten good minutes in my seat! My Ladies de Pompadour and d'Estrées are "getting it in the neck"! Bending over them, the ballet-master lets fly a string of not very strong oaths which the Vert-Galant's mistress, a short, well-rounded brunette, receives with impatience, facing in our direction, her eyes on the exit.

The other, the Marquise, hangs her head like a child who has broken a vase. She stares at the floor, without saying a word;

her breath lifts the heavy lock of blonde hair that falls across her cheek. The dismal light beating down from above sculpts her head into that of a thin, hollow-cheeked boy-martyr, and this Pompadour, in her black knickers with bare knees showing above her rolled stockings, bears a strange resemblance to a young drummer-boy of the Revolution. Her whole stubborn little hurt person spells rebellion and seems to cry aloud "Long live the strike!"

At a standstill for the moment, the "Pavane" has regrouped round her, twenty silent young women at the end of their tether. In the dark their eyes try to pick out the seat from which the Manager supervises their movements, while they wait eagerly for the liberating words "That will be all for today" to surge up from some dim spot in the stalls. But they also appear tonight to the waiting for something else: "The strike, oh Lord, the strike!" Tonight there is something aggressive about their fatigue.

In direct contrast to the men—singers and mimes, dancers and acrobats—who strive to preserve a serious man-to-man tone, courteous and calm in discussion, when they further their claims, the little "Caf'-Con' " girls, my comrades, have caught fire immediately. Being emotional Parisiennes, the mention of the single word "strike" makes them imagine confusedly mobs out in the streets, riots, barricades.

The girls don't make a practice of it. The strict and simple discipline by which we are ruled brooks no infringement. Under the bluish sun of two projectors has been evolved, up till these troubled days, the most rigorous and hard-worked routine for small communities, alleviated in a trice by a word from the Manager—"Take it easy, Ladies. Do you think you're in a theatre?" or "I don't like people who bawl at me." Yes, they don't make a habit of "refractoriness" or going on strike. That Agnes Sorel over yonder, who stands so tall on her long legs, yawning with hunger, will soon be off and away to her pigeon-house, at the back of beyond on the other side of the Butte de Montmartre. She never has the time for a hot meal, she lives too far away, she's always on the trot.

"It's not per performance she earns her monthly hundred and eighty francs, but per mile!" says Diane de Poitiers, who wears thin summer blouses in mid-December.

As for that handsome Montespan of the heavy bosom, is it for a moment likely that she acquired her habitual complaints from her husband, a consumptive bookbinder! She has more than enough on her hands looking after her man and two kids far out near the Château-d'Eau district.

They are so easily regimented, these poor honeyless bees! Any milliner's apprentice in the Rue de la Paix could put them wise on the question of claims. They said in the past "Great! We strike!" as they would have said "We're going to win the big lottery!", without any conviction. Now that they do believe in it, they are beginning to tremble, with hope.

Will they receive full pay for those terrible twice-nightly performances on Sunday and Thursday, and for the fête-days sprinkled throughout the calendar? Even better: will they be compensated for the long prison-hours, midday to six, while a Revue is in production? Would the snack of croissants, bock and banana they bolt in rehearsal time be buckshee? And Old Mother Louis, our rheumatically duenna, who plays comic mothers-in-law and Negresses, will her bus-fare on Sundays and Thursdays be drawn from some other source than the miserable pin money she earns by her knitting, she who knits, everywhere and every minute, for a knitted garment shop?

As for those rush-hour nights, dreaded above all when the full-dress rehearsal for a Revue goes on till dawn, would it no longer be solely "for the honour of the house" that fifty or so "walkers" from the chorus have to go back home in the freezing early hours, . . . swollen feet and weak ankles, yawning themselves to death?

It sounds good. It is disquieting. Our little community is at fever-pitch. At night, in the wings, someone seizes me by the sleeves, and questions me.

"You're for the strike, aren't you?" and someone else adds, in a voice of assurance but with fluttering gestures, "In the first place, it's only fair."

Not everybody shares the bitter scepticism of this blonde, hollow-cheeked child, Mme. de Pompadour, a philosopher of nineteen, whom I have nicknamed Cassandra and who resents it without exactly knowing why. "If we strike, where will it get us? It will only help to fatten the cinema crowd. And while it lasts, what are the two of us going to feed on, Moman and me?"

It must be at least a quarter past six. I am almost asleep, my arms pushed deep in my muff, my chin in my fur. I feel warm on the shoulders and cold in the feet, due to the fact that the central heating is not lit for rehearsals. What am I doing here? It is too late for work today. I have gone on waiting with the fatalistic patience learned in the music-hall. I may as well wait on a little longer and then leave at the same time as the tired swarm of day girls who will disperse over the face of Paris.

The ones in the greatest hurry and those whose job brings them back here at eight, will not go far afield: the slice of pale veal on its bed of sorrel, or the dubious lamb stew, await them in the brasserie round the corner. The others make off at the run as soon as their feet touch the pavement. "I've just time to rush home for a minute."

Rush home to a grumbling "Moman", for a wash and clean, to retie the ribbon that binds hair and forehead, to make sure that the kid has not fallen from the window or burnt himself on the stove, and houpla! the return journey. They jump on a bus, a tram, the underground, pell mell with all the other employees—milliners, seamstresses, cashiers, typists—for whom the day's work is over.

BASTIENNE'S CHILD

I

"Run, Bastienne, run!"

The ballerinas scurry the whole length of the corridor, brushing the petals of their skirts against the wall, leaving behind them the smell of rice powder, hair still warm from the curling-tongs, new tarlatan gauze. Bastienne runs, not quite so fast, both hands encircling her waist. They have been "rung" rather late, and were she to arrive on the stage out of breath, might she not fumble, perhaps, the end of her variation, that lengthy spin during which nothing is seen of her but the fully extended, creamy swirl of a ballet-skirt and two slim pink legs moving apart and coming together again with a mechanical precision already appreciated by connoisseurs?

She is not, as yet, anything more than a very young dancer, under a year's contract to the Grand-Théâtre at X; a poor girl, of radiant beauty, tall, "expensive to feed" as she says of herself, and underfed, because she is already five months pregnant.

Of the child's father, there is no news.

"He's a bad lot, that man!" says Bastienne.

But she speaks of him without tearing out her dark hair, so silky against her clear white skin, and her "misfortune" has not driven her either to the river, or to the gas oven. She dances as before and recognises three powerful deities: the manager of the Grand-Théâtre, the ballet-mistress, and the proprietor of the hotel where live, besides Bastienne herself, a dozen of her comrades. However, since the morning when Bastienne, turning deathly pale during the dancing lesson, confessed with a peasant's simplicity "Madame, it's because I'm expecting!" the ballet-mistress

has spared her. But she does not wish to be spared, and dismisses any special attention with an indignant jerk of the elbow and a "Why, I'm not ailing!"

The weight that swells her waist-line she calmly accepts, apart from passing a few rude remarks on it with the inconsequence of her seventeen years. "As for you, I'm going to put some sense in you!" And she pulls in her belt, loath not to display for as long as possible, and above all on the stage, the flexibility of her slim, broad-shouldered figure. She laughingly insults her burden, slapping it with the flat of her hands, then adding "How hungry it makes me!" Unthinkingly she commits the heroic imprudence of all penniless girls: having paid her weekly hotel bill, she often goes to bed without dinner or supper, and keeps her stays on all night to "cut her appetite"

Bastienne, in fact, leads the indigent, happy-go-lucky but hard-working life of the little motherless ballerinas who have no lover. Between the morning lesson, starting at nine, the afternoon rehearsal, and the nightly performance, they have next to no time left for thought. Their wretched phalanstery does not know the meaning of despair, since solitude and insomnia never afflict its members.

Impudent and crafty after their fashion, driven to extremes by the ragings of an empty stomach, Bastienne and her roommate—a dumpy little blonde—sometimes spend their last pennies in the Grand-Théâtre Brasserie, after midnight, on a bottle of beer.

Seated opposite one another, they shrilly exchange the remarks of a prearranged dialogue.

"Now, if I had the money, I'd treat myself to a fat ham-sandwich!"

"Yes, but you've not got a sou. I've got none neither, but supposing I had, I'd certainly order myself a nice grilled black pudding, with lots of mustard and a hunk of bread. . . ."

"Oh, I'd far rather have a sauerkraut, with plenty of sausage. . . ."

It so happens that the sauerkraut and the grilled black pudding, so feverishly evoked, providentially descend between the

two little ballerinas, escorted by the generous donor, whom they welcome with thanks, with a joke and a smile, and then leave in the lurch, all before the half hour has struck.

This innocent method of begging is the invention of Bastienne, whose "interesting condition" earns her a curiosity not so far removed from consideration. Her comrades count the weeks and consult the cards concerning the child's fortune. They make a fuss of her, helping to tighten her dancing stays with a heave-ho as they pull on the lace, one knee pressed against her robust thighs. They freely bestow on her preposterous advice, recommending her to take witch's potions, ever helpful, and shouting after her, as tonight, down the long dark corridors, "Run, Bastienne, run!"

They keep an anxious eye on her imprudent dancing, insist above all on escorting her back to her dressing-room, to be there at the moment when, unhooking her torturous breastplate, she laughingly threatens the youngest, silliest, and most inquisitive with "Take care, or he'll pop out and perch on your nose!"

Today, in the warmest corner of the big dressing-room, there stands, supported on two chairs, the tray of an old travelling-trunk with a canopy of flowered wallpaper. It is the piteous crib of a tiny little Bastienne, hardy as a weed. She is brought to the theatre by her mother at eight, and is removed at midnight under her cloak. This much-dandled, merry little mite, this babe with scarcely a stitch of clothing, who is dressed by small clumsy hands that knit for it, awkwardly, pilches and bonnets, enjoys, despite her environment, the gorgeous childhood of a fairy-tale princess. Ethiopian slaves in coffee-coloured tights, Egyptian girls hung with blue jewellery, houris stripped to the waist, bend over her cot and let her play with their necklaces, their feather fans, their veils that change the colour of the light. The tiny little Bastienne falls asleep and wakes in scented young arms, while Peris, with faces the rose pink of fuchsias, croon her songs to the rhythm of a far distant orchestra.

A dusky Asian maid, keeping watch by the door, shouts down the corridor, "Run, Bastienne, run! Your daughter is thirsty!"

In comes Bastienne, breathless, smoothing her tense billowing skirts with the tips of her fingers, and runs straight to the tray of the old travelling trunk. Without waiting to sit down or unfasten her low-cut bodice, she uses both hands to free from its pressure a swollen breast, blue in colour from its generous veins. Leaning over, one foot lifted in the dancer's classical pose, her flared skirts like a luminous wheel around her, she suckles her daughter.

II

"Look, Bastienne, the Serbs are here, and over here is Greece. This part streaked with thin lines is Bulgaria. All this bit marked in black shows the advance made by the Allies, while the Turks have been forced to retreat as far as here. Now d'you understand?"

Bastienne's huge eyes, the colour of light tobacco, are wide open and she nods her head politely, muttering "Mmm . . . Mmm . . ." She takes a long look at the map over which her companion Peloux is running a thin, hardened finger, and finally exclaims "Lord, how small it is, how very small!"

Peloux, who was hardly expecting this conclusion, bursts out laughing, and it is on her now that Bastienne focuses in astonishment her huge orbs, always a little slow in registering any change of thought.

The complicated map, covered with dotted lines and hatching, represents to Bastienne nothing but a confused design for embroidery. Fortunately Constantinople is there, printed in capitals. She knows of its existence, it's a town. Peloux has a sister, an elder sister of twenty-eight, who once played in a comedy at Constantinople, in the presence of . . .

"In whose presence was it, Peloux, your sister played in Constantinople?"

"In front of the Sultan, of course!" comes the lie direct from Peloux.

Bastienne, incredulous and deferential, spends another moment or two deciphering the newspaper. What a lot of unreadable names! What a lot of unknown countries! For, after all, she did once dance in a *Divertissement* which brought together the five parts of the world. Very well, those five parts were: America, which had meant a foundation make-up of terra cotta; Africa, Nigger-brown tights; Spain, fringed shawls; France, a snow-white tutu, and for Russia, red leather boots. If the map of the world had now to be cut up like a jigsaw puzzle, and from each small section had to be conjured up a fully armed, wicked little nation nobody had ever heard of, then it made life far too complicated. . . . Bastienne casts a hostile glance at the nebulous photographs round the edge of the map and declares "To start with, all those chaps there look like the cycle cops in their flat caps! Now, Peloux, supposing you give the child a good slap, just to teach her not to eat your thread!"

Tired of staring so long at "small print", Bastienne gets to her feet, sighs, and winds round her ear, like a ribbon, a strand of her long black hair. She deigns to cast a majestic animal glance upon her daughter, crawling on all fours at her feet, then bends down and, lifting a corner of the petticoat and chemise, administers by the count, on a round rosy little behind, a good half dozen resounding slaps.

"Oh!" protests Peloux, in rather a frightened whisper.

"Don't you worry," Bastienne retorts, "I'm not killing her. Besides, she minds pain so little, it's unbelievable."

Indeed, there's no sound to be heard either of the dramatic tears or the piercing shrieks of very young children when they sob to the point of suffocation: nothing but the furious drubbing of two small shoes against the floor boards where the tiny little Bastienne rolls herself into a ball like a caterpillar knocked off a gooseberry bush, and no more.

. . . Bastienne is today a truly magnificent creature, due to her premature motherhood, and to having recovered the habit of regular meals now that she has a warm lodging. A gallant tradesman, as much out of pity as dazzled by her beauty, had brought

home mother and child on Christmas Eve when Bastienne was revelling on tuppence worth of hot roasted chestnuts.

His reward is to come back every evening to the small apartment from which can be seen a grey flowing river and find there a tall, friendly Bastienne, gay, a little standoffish but faithful, busied over her career and her daughter. She thrives in a home of her own, at ease in one of those aprons such as are worn by girls who deliver bread, and tied, as it is today, over her kimono, her hair hanging over her shoulders with that newly washed but still uncombed look that enhances her nineteen years.

This is a lovely holiday afternoon for Bastienne and her friend Peloux. No ballet is in rehearsal at the Grand-Théâtre, the dry December weather makes the stove roar, and ahead of them lie four good hours of freedom, while drop by drop the coffee fills the tinsplate filter. Peloux is puckering the "under-skirts" of a work-a-day costume in coarse bluish-white tarlatan and, without pricking her finger or making a mistake, she contrives to keep an eye on the war news, the deserted street, and a catalogue of novelties.

"You know, Bastienne, we won't have any more roasted pistachio-nuts, on account of the war: that old Turk who sells them told me as much. . . . That's the third time that lieutenant down there has repassed the house. . . . Bastienne, what about an astrakhan cloak like this one here, when you're rich? You'd look stunning in it!"

But Bastienne's placid soul, her stay-at-home, domesticated little dancer's soul, yearns for no furs. When she goes window-shopping, her eye lingers on unbleached linen rather than on velvets, and she lets her fingers run over rough scarlet-bordered dusters. . . . At present she is smiling in an honestly sensuous way over her favourite chore: standing over a small basin, her lovely arms covered in lukewarm froth, looking as beautiful as a queen in a wash-house, she is soaping her daughter's underwear, without spilling a drop around her. . . . Why could not life, her future, that is, and even her duty, be contained within the four gaily papered walls of this small dining-room, scented with

coffee, white soap and orris-root? Life, for a now flourishing though once misery-racked Bastienne, means dancing in the first place, then working, in the humble and domestic sense of the word given it by the race of thrifty females. Jewellery, money, fine clothes . . . these are things not so much rejected by stern choice, as postponed by Bastienne. They lie somewhere faraway in her thoughts, and she does not call them forth. One day they may just happen, like a legacy, like a chimney-pot falling on your head, or like the arrival of the mysterious little daughter now playing on the floor-rug, whose healthy growth still gives Bastienne a daily increasing awareness of the miraculous and unforeseen.

A year ago everything in life had seemed simple: to suffer hunger and cold, to have leaky shoes, to feel lonely and miserable and heavily burdened in body, "all that might well happen to anyone," Bastienne had blandly remarked. All was simple then, and still is, except for the existence of her fifteen-month-old child, except for the blonde little angel, curly-headed and up to every trick, now in a silent rage on the floor-rug. To so young and inexperienced a mother, a child is a lovely warm little creature, dependent, according to its age, on milk, soup, kisses and slaps. So things go on and on until . . . good heavens, until the time comes for the first dancing-class. But it so happens that before her very eyes, under her warm kisses and stinging smacks, a small being is fast developing an independent personality, thinking, struggling, and arguing even before knowing how to talk! And that, Bastienne had not foreseen. "A chit of fifteen months, who already has ideas of her own!"

Peloux shakes her head with the earnest, pinched expression that gives her at twenty an old maidish look, and starts to tell stories of infant prodigies and criminal children. The truth is that the surprising little Bastienne, aged fifteen months, already knows how to captivate, fib, make pretence of tummy-ache, or, sobbing loudly, stretch out a plump hand nobody has trodden on; knows, too, the power of obstinate silence, and above all knows how to pretend to be listening to the grown-ups' conversation, eyes wide open, mouth tight shut, so much so that Peloux

and Bastienne sometimes behave like frightened schoolgirls and suddenly stop talking, because this disturbing witness, with its mop of fair curls, looks less like a baby than a mischievous little Eros.

It is on the face of the tiny little Bastienne, far more than on her mother's lovely tranquil face or Peloux's already faded features, that are mirrored all the worldly passions: uncontrolled covetousness, dissimulation, beguiling seductiveness.

"Oh, how peaceful we should be," sighs Peloux, "were it not for this magpie of a child gobbling up all my needles."

"Catch her, if you can leave your stitching," Bastienne answers. "My hands are covered with suds."

But the "magpie of a child" has parked itself behind the sewing-machine, and all that can be seen, between the treadle and the platform, is a pair of deep blue eyes, which, in their isolation, might be fifteen months, or fifteen years, or older still.

"Come here, you delicious lump of poison!" Peloux begs.

"Will you come here, you fiend incarnate!" Bastienne scolds.

No answer. The blue eyes move only an instant to cast their insolent light on Bastienne. And if Peloux redoubles her entreaties and Bastienne her invective, it will not be from fear that the fair chubby-cheeked Eros ambushed behind the sewing-machine may devour a gross of needles; it will be rather to hide the constraint, the embarrassment imposed on outspoken grown-ups when under scrutiny from a small unfathomable child.

CHEAP - JACKS

The Accompanist

"Madame Barucchi is on her way, Madame, please don't be impatient with her: she's just telephoned to say she can't help being a little late for your lesson, on account of the dress re-

hearsal of the ballet at the Empyrée. You have a few minutes to spare, I'm sure."

". . ."

"In any case, we're a little fast in here, it's only ten to . . . When I say 'we', well, I'm always on time myself. I hardly ever move from here the whole day long."

". . . ?"

"No, it's not that the work is really hard; but it is sometimes a little dreary in this large, bare studio. And then, in the evening, I must say I do feel a bit tired in the back from sitting on the piano-stool."

". . ."

"So young? But I'm not so young, I'm twenty-six! Sometimes I feel so old, from doing the same thing day after day! Twenty-six, a little boy of five, and no husband."

". . . ?"

"Yes, he was mine, that little boy you saw yesterday. When he comes out from his nursery-school, Mme. Barucchi is kind enough to let me have him here, so that I don't have to fret about what's become of him. He's sweet. He watches all these ladies here at their lesson, he's learnt a few steps already. He's an observant child."

". . ."

"Yes, I know. I'm always being told that I'm doing an old woman's job and that I can well afford the time to wait until I'm grey-haired before settling down as an accompanist, but I'd rather stick where I am. And then I've already suffered a good many hard knocks in my life, so all I ask is to be left to sit quietly on my piano-stool. . . . You're looking at the time? Be patient for a little longer! Mme. Barucchi can't be long now. I know you're wasting precious minutes, whereas I'm earning my income, at the moment, by twiddling my thumbs. That doesn't happen to me very often!"

". . . ?"

"Because I'm paid by the hour. Two francs fifty."

". . . !"

"You don't think that a lot? But just consider, Madame,

everyone plays the piano, there's a neighbour of mine who gives lessons in town at a franc a time: out of that she has to pay her bus fare, plus the wear and tear of her shoe-leather and umbrella. And here am I under cover all day, and warm, even too warm: the studio stove sometimes makes me feel dizzy. But then I have the satisfaction of being among artistes; that makes up for a lot."

". . . ?"

"No, I've never been on the stage. I was a model once, before I had my little boy. That left me with certain tastes, certain habits. I could never again live a common or garden life. There was a moment, three years ago, when Mme. Barucchi advised me to try the music-hall, as a dancer. . . . 'But,' I said to her, 'I don't know how to dance.'—'That makes no difference,' she answered, 'you could go on as a "dancer in the nude": then you wouldn't tire yourself out by dancing.' I had no wish to do that."

". . . ?"

"Oh, that wasn't the only reason. A dancer in the nude, as the saying goes, displays no more than any of the others. A dancer in the nude always means something in the Egyptian style, and that entails a good ten pounds' weight of beaten-metal straps and belts and ornaments, beaded lattice-work on the legs, necklaces from here to there, and no end of veils. No, it wasn't merely the question of decency that made me decline. It's my nature to stay in my corner and watch the others.

"People are passing through here all day long, not only the ladies of the music-hall, but actresses, real stage-actresses, who play in the boulevard theatres, especially now that there is so much dancing in straight plays. I must admit they are like fish out of water at the start. They're not accustomed to taking their clothes off for their lesson. They arrive wearing the latest fashion models, they begin by lifting up their dress and fastening it with safety-pins, then they become exasperated, the heat mounts higher, they unhook their collar, and then they get rid of their skirt and next thing it's the blouse. . . . Finally, their stays come off, hairpins start falling out and some of their hair, too, on occasion, and their face-powder turns moist. At the end of an hour's work you would be in fits to see, in the place of a smart

lady, an ordinary little woman, running with sweat, who pants and rages, swears a little, dabs her cheeks with a handkerchief, and doesn't care a button if her nose is shining: in fact, just an ordinary woman! There's no malice in what I've been saying, believe me, but it does amuse me. I enjoy my little observations."

" . . . ?"

"Oh, certainly not, it gives me no wish to exchange my lot for theirs. The mere thought of such a thing makes me feel tired. Dancing lessons apart, they still go rushing around outside, at least that's how I see it. You should hear them retailing their grievances. 'Oh, heavens above, I have to be at such and such a place at five, and at my masseuse's at five-thirty, then back home for an appointment at six! Then there's my three stage dresses to try on! Oh, heavens above, I'll never get through it all!'

"It's terrifying. I have to close my eyes, they make me feel sleepy. The other day, for example, Mme. Dorziat—yes, Mme. Dorziat, in person—very kindly said to Mme. Barucchi, referring to me, 'That poor girl, who's been grinding away at my dance-music for the last hour and a quarter, I shouldn't care to be in her place!' My place, my place, why, it's the one that suits me best! All I ask is to be left alone in it. I fooled about a bit in my younger days, and I've been well punished for it! But it's left me apprehensive. The more I see of the way others fling themselves into the swirl of life, the more I want to remain seated. For here I see little else but the fuss and bother in which people become involved. Bright lights, spangles, costumes, painted faces, smiles, that spectacular sort of life is not for me. I see nothing but careers, sweat, skins that are yellow by the light of day, and despondency. . . . I'm not much good at expressing myself, but those are the lines along which my mind works. It seems as though I were the only person with a working knowledge of the sidelights that others view from the front of the stage."

" . . . ?"

"Get married, me? Oh, no, I should be afraid, now. As I was saying, it's left me apprehensive. No, no, things are all right as

they are, I wish to remain just as I am. Just as I am, with my little boy clinging to my skirts, both of us well sheltered behind my piano."

The Cashier

Watch dogs, in a kennel with its back turned to the west wind, are better housed. She has her lair, from eight in the evening till midnight, and from two till five for matinées, in a damp recess under the stairs leading down to the artistes' dressing-rooms, and the battered little deal pay-desk is her sole protection against the brutal draught directed at her whenever the constantly opened and shut iron door swings back into place. Alternate hot and cold gusts, from the radiator on one side and the stairs on the other, slightly ruffle the curls round her head and her little knitted tippet, whose every stitch carries an imitation jet bead.

For the past twenty-four years she has been entering in a cash-book the number of soft drinks consumed in the stalls of the Folies-Gobelins, as well as those in the Café-Gobelins annexed to the theatre: bocks, mazagran coffees, brandied cherries. An electric bulb hangs above her head like a pear on a string, petticoated in green paper, and at first all that can be distinguished is a small yellow hand emerging from a starched cuff. A small yellow hand, clean, but with the thumb and forefinger blackened from counting coins and copper tallies.

After a short while of attentive scrutiny, the features of the cashier can easily be discerned, among the many green shadows cast by the lamp, on the shrivelled face of a pleasant, timorous old lizard, devoid of all colour. Supposing her cheek were pricked, would there spurt from it, instead of blood, pale globules of the anaemic juice used in bottling brandied cherries?

When I go down to my dressing-room, she hands me my key from on top of the five-shelved row of those special cherries for

which the establishment is far famed: five cherries per portion in a glass cupel, arranged pyramidally, so that they look like the boxed shrubs in a French formal garden, with the ink-well, in this instance, a substitute for the glass-surfaced water.

I know nothing of the cashier except her bust, always bent forward from her habit of writing and her desire to please. . . . She arrives at the Folies-Gobelins long before me and leaves at midnight. Does she walk? has she legs and feet, a woman's body? All that must have melted away, after twenty-four years behind her battered little pay-desk!

A lizard, yes, a nice little wrinkled lizard, old and frail, but not so timorous after all: her tart voice has a shrill ring of authority, and to one and all alike she exhibits the equable kindliness of one whose power is undisputed. She treats the waiters like unruly children, tut-tutting like a governess, and the artistes like irresponsible or sick children, past correction. The chief stagehand, grey-haired, blue boiler-suited, speaks to her as would a small boy: he has been on the house staff for a mere eighteen years!

In some obscure way, the cashier feels herself to be as fixed and weather-beaten as the building itself, and the panel of her hutch, never whitewashed, never repainted, is thickly coated with a shiny black, with an indelible varnish of dirt: I can't help being reminded of other smoky traces left untouched by the centuries, the smoky traces of a lamp—for ever extinguished—at Cumae, in the Sibyl's cave.

It is from the lips of our benign Sibyl that I learn, in three words, whether the audience is dense or sparse, whether the trade in soft drinks is slack or flowing abundantly. She also informs me of how my face looks, of the temper of the upper gallery, and of the reception accorded to the evening's "first appearance".

I learn, into the bargain, that it is cold outside or that rain can be expected. What can she know of the weather, this cashier who, to reach her windswept hovel, must quit some other murky basement, far distant, and make her way by métro, under the ground, always under the ground.

Only smothered strains of the orchestra reach her, sometimes carrying on a wave of music the shrill high note of a popular soprano. . . . The applause crackles like a distant fall of rubble.

The cashier lends it her ear and says to me, "You hear them? All that is for little Jady! She's made quite a hit here. She's got a way of putting it across that is all her own, and she . . ."

Her voice sounds discreet, amiable; it remains for me to detect the underlying censure, the compassionate scorn for all things and creatures connected with the music-hall.

The cashier has great affection for the dirt and gloom of the Folies-Gobelins, for her hovel, her lamp with its green petticoat, and her flower borders of brandied cherries. What takes place on the stage is no concern of hers. When I rush off, out of breath, quite beside myself, and shout to her as I pass "How splendidly it's gone tonight, a first-rate audience! They made us take four curtain calls!" she smiles in response, and says "Now's the moment for you to rush to your dressing-room and give yourself a hard rub with eau-de-Cologne, or you'll catch a chill." She adds nothing but a superficial flicker of her keen eyes over my unfastened dress and my bare sandalled feet.

It is in the warmth and darkness of the Folies-Gobelins incubator that the insufferable little Jady was hatched out: two quivering legs, as clever and responsive as antennae, a pointed, fragile voice that breaks every other instant—like the legs of an insect, no sooner snapped than they've grown together again—and, the other day, when standing by the pay-desk, I happened to expatiate on the peculiar gifts of this singer born to be a dancer.

"Yes," the cashier concurred, "I'm bound to admit that she's won universal applause. They tell me she's got pep, she's got dash, she's got 'it', in other words, she's got everything, but how can I tell? But do you know her little girl? No? A darling, Madame, a real beauty! And so sweet and well mannered! Only two, but she knows how to say please and thank-you, and can even blow kisses! And amenable, too! You can leave her by herself at home the whole livelong day, just think of that!"

I do think of that. And I come to think that a despondent moralist, a discriminating if captious critic, is hidden away in this

gloomy hovel under the stairs of the Folies-Gobelins. Our wrinkled Sibyl does not cry after us "Unhappy, erring folk that you are, have the words 'family', 'morals', 'hygiene', no meaning for you?" She smiles, rather, and murmurs at the end of a sentence which has no conclusion, "Think of that! . . ." And it needed no more than that for me to visualise, in some suburban tenement, a baby of two, *amenable*, left alone by itself all day, waiting contentedly until such time as its mother should finish her act.

Nostalgia

"It's me, Madame, it's the dresser. Has Madame everything she requires?"

". . . !"

"Well! If this isn't something more than a surprise! I felt sure it would bowl you over to see me again! Yes, yes, it's me all right! You never expected to find your old Jeanne of the Empyrée-Clichy down here! Yes, I'm spending the winter in Nice, like the English. And how are things with you? All going well?"

". . ."

"Same goes for me, not but what there's a deal I could say on the subject. . . ."

". . ."

"Yes, yes, I'll get you dressed, never you worry. Now, for your first scene, is it this blue dress, or that tea-gown affair in pink?"

". . ."

"Good! Once I know, I don't need telling a second time. Now, that is really something, that muslin with nothing under it. Very becoming. Why, it's the very spit of the costume little Miriam wore at the Empyrée, you remember?"

". . . ?"

"Little Miriam, you surely remember, in the Apotheosis of Aviation, in this year's Spring Revue! And this one here does make a difference, as you might say, with the dress you wore at the Empyrée, don't it?"

". . . ?"

"Why, the other winter. The peasant skirt, with the kerchief tied over your head, and clogs. My heart gave a jump when I read your name on the posters here! I saw you again as you were in your piece at the Empyrée; it seemed like I was still there!"

". . . ?"

"Me? Perish the thought! You have to have time on your hands to feel proper fed up. My work's cut out for me here, for it's me that has the cleaning of the dressing-rooms. They've got no man to do the job, the theatre here being so small! And matinée twice a week! And those conferences, when I've got to be on the spot in case the audition ladies need a stitch putting in here or a pin there. . . . During the acts, yes, I must say it does get a bit lonely like in the corridor; I get chilly, sitting there on my chair. I doze off, and wake up thinking I'm still at the Empyrée-Clichy. . . . Just think, when one's been dresser for fifteen years in the same establishment! And fifteen years of good service, I may say. Never a harsh word did I have from Mme. Barney, "the boss" as you used to say. There's an able woman for you, Madame! Hard on slackers, maybe, but above all fair. Naturally, one spared oneself no pains when working for her. In the last Revue, if you remember, I had sixteen ladies to dress, eight on my passage, and eight on the landing, the landing, you know, they had to convert into a dressing-room for want of space. I'm not saying it turned out the most suitable place: persons undressing don't much care to see whoever it may be passing through at any moment as they rush up and down the stairs. . . . Not to mention the draughts. . . . Sixteen, I ask you! My fingers were worn to the bone with all those hooks and eyes. But there you are, Madame, never an entrance missed!"

". . . ?"

"But of course, I'm very happy here. What makes you think I'm not? M. Lafougère is a very nice man. He's engaged my son, as from tonight."

". . . ?"

"Oh, no, not as an actor, you couldn't expect that! He starts as a stagehand. That makes a pair of you making your debut together like. It's for his health that I'm here. The doctor says to me, he says: 'What he needs is the south for his bronchial tubes.' M. Lafougère has taken on the two of us."

". . . ?"

"Oh, no, you won't be late. Precious little chance of you ever being late here! A show billed for eight-thirty may well start at nine, more or less. Ah, we're not with Mme. Barney no more! The music-hall, I always say, is founded on punctuality."

". . . ?"

"What's that noise you can hear? That's the actors in the second piece, the one with the dancing. Listen to them, just listen! And we shout, and we sing, tra-la-la, and we pick quarrels! They've no manners, no self-respect. No, but I ask you, do you hear them? With a row like that, there's no more believing myself at the Empyrée-Clichy. You've worked there yourself, so you can tell me whether you ever heard one word spoken louder than another in that house! The theatre and the café-concert, it's not the same thing, whatever people may say!"

". . ."

"Oh, you can sigh, I don't blame you! Many's the time I have to bite back my words not to give the ladies here a piece of my mind. Only the other day one of them yelled in my face 'Keep the door shut, Jeanne, can't you, when people are stark naked in their dressing-room. It's plain to see you come from the music-hall!' Another word, and I'd have answered back 'And it's plain to see that's where you don't come from. They've got no time for the likes of you! In the music-hall, we've no use for a skimpy cricket like you; what we want are persons who have the wherewithal to fill out their tights and their stays. . . .' Such words are best left unspoken: home truths are never popular."

. . . Your little bronze shoes and stockings to match, do you want me to have them ready for the second play?"

" . . . !"

"Could be it's a Greek play; but you'll never find anything that sets off your legs to better advantage than bronze stockings and a pair of little shoes like these here. The main point about dancing is to set off one's legs. However, let us say I've never said a word. . . . You've never been back there again, to the old place?"

" . . . ?"

"But to the *Empyrée-Clichy*, of course! You don't know if my old colleague, Ma Martin, is still there?"

" . . . "

"So much the worst. I'd very much like to have news of her. She'd promised me faithfully to write, but envy must have turned her heart green. My engagement here has made many envious of me, you know. 'To Nice!' is what Ma Martin said to me, 'you're going to Nice! You are among the honoured! You'll be able to go over to Monte Carlo and win a fortune!'"

" . . . ?"

"No, I've not been there yet. But I'll go there all right! I'll go, if only to be able to tell them all at the old place that I have been there. I'll first tell Ma Martin, then I'll tell Mme. Cavellier. . . ."

" . . . ?"

"Mme. Cavellier, the romantic ballad singer, Rachel's sister!"

" . . . ?"

"Oh, yes, surely you do! Mme. Cavellier, with a husband in the *claque*, her sister, an American dancer, and her son a programme-seller in the foyer. Good Lord, aren't you forgetful now! I'd never have thought it of you! And Rita, don't you remember her? I knew it. Well, she's there no more."

" . . . ?"

"Where but at the *Empyrée-Clichy*, what do you expect?"

" . . . ?"

"What! Haven't I been talking to you of nothing but the *Empyrée-Clichy*? But what else would you have me talk of?"

Ah, but you're still a proper tease, I can see that! Don't chaff me unkindly, I have a real liking for you, because we were there together. And I can say this to you, for I know you won't laugh at me, but I read through, in yesterday's *Comœdia*, the full account of the Christmas Revue at the Empyrée-Clichy. Well, at the idea that they'd managed the whole thing without me—the rush and bustle of the dress rehearsal, the critic's preview, and the first night—why the paper dropped from my hands, and I began to cry like a silly old fool."

Clever Dogs

"Hold her! Hold her! Oh, the bitch, she's nipped her again!"

Manette has just eluded the stagehand's grip and hurled herself on Cora, who was half expecting it. But the little fox terrier is endowed with the speed of a projectile and her teeth have bitten right through the collie's thick fur and into the flesh of the neck. Cora does not retaliate at once; her ears intent on the curtain bell, her pendulous lips drawn back as far as her eyes, she offers no other threat to her comrade than a grimace as fierce as a vixen's mask and a strangled rattle, soft as the purring of a large cat.

Back in her master's arms, with the hair all down her back on end like pig's bristles, Manette is choking to say something offensive.

"They'd like to gobble each other up!" the stagehand remarks.

"The idea!" Harry retorts. "They're too conscientious for that. Quick, the collars."

While he is tying round Cora's neck the blue ribbon which sets off to advantage her fair coat, the colour of ripe wheat, the stagehand fastens on Manette's back a pug's harness of green velvet studded with gold, heavy with plaques and jingle-bells.

"Hold her tight, just long enough for me to get into my dolman. . . ."

Harry's snuff-coloured cardigan, brown with sweat, disappears beneath his sapphire blue dolman, padded round the shoulders and almost skin tight. Cora, restrained by the stagehand, gasps ever more loudly, keeping her eyes trained upwards on Manette's posterior, on a Manette almost in convulsions and quite terrifying, with her bloodshot eyes and backward cocked ears.

"Wouldn't a good dressing down quiet 'em?" ventures the boy in the blue jacket.

"Never before their act," Harry snaps categorically.

Behind the lowered curtain, he tests the equilibrium of the railings which enclose the track of miniature obstacles, makes certain the platform and hurdle are secure, and polishes with a woollen rag the nickel-plated bars of the springboards on which the yellow collie will rebound. It is he too who goes to fetch from his dressing-room a set of paper hoops still damp from hasty resticking.

"I do everything myself!" he declares. "The master's eye. . . ."

Behind his back the stagehand shrugs his shoulders, "The master's eye, my foot! That means no tip for the team!"

The two-man "team" bears Harry no grudge on his fifteen francs a day takings. "Fifteen francs for three mouths and ten paws, that's not much!" the stagehand concedes.

Three mouths, ten paws and two hundred kilos of luggage. The whole concern tours throughout the year with the aid of special third-class half-fare rates. The year before there was an extra "mouth", that of the white poodle now defunct; an over-age old campaigner, a dog that had had his day, well-known in every French and foreign establishment, and much regretted by Harry, who loves to sing the praises of poor old Charlot.

"He knew how to do everything, Madame: waltz, somersault, spring-board work, all the tricks of a canine calculator, he knew the lot. He could have taught me a few, I'm telling you, and I've trained a good few circus dogs in my time! He loved his job, and nothing else, as for the rest, he was a duffer. Towards the end you wouldn't have given a bob for him had you seen him by day, he looked so old, fourteen he must have been, at least, and

that stiff from the rheumatics, with his eyes running and his black muzzle going all grey. He only began to wake up when the time for his act came round; it was then that he was well worth seeing! I used to doll him up like a movie star, with black cosmetic on his nose, thick pencil round his poor old rheumy eyes, I'd starch-powder him all over to make him white as snow, then add the blue ribbons! My word, Madame, he soon came alive again! Hardly had I finished his make-up, when off he went, walking on his hind legs, sneezing, and carrying on no end till the curtain rose. Back in the wings again, I used to wrap him in a blanket and then give him a spirit rub. I certainly prolonged his life, but no performing poodle can last for ever!

"My two bitches there, they do their work all right, but it's not the same thing at all. They love their master, they fear the whip, they use their heads and are conscientious, but there's no professional pride in their make-up. They go through their routine as though they were pulling a cart, no more, no less. They're hard workers, but they're not true artistes. It's easy to see from their faces that they'd like to be through with the whole performance, and the public don't like that. Either they think the animals are playing them up, or else they make no bones about saying 'Poor beasts, how sad they look! What tortures they must have endured to learn all those monkey tricks!' I'd just like to watch 'em, all those ladies and gentlemen of the 'Protection for Animals', trying to put the dogs through their paces. Why, they'd do exactly like me and my sort. Sugar, hunting-crop; hunting-crop, sugar; with a good dose of patience added: there's no other way that I know of."

At this very moment the "hard workers" are eyeing each other with hostile intent. Manette, perched on a block of multicoloured wood, is nervously trembling; while, facing her, Cora has laid her ears back flat like a sorry cat.

At the shrill of the bell, the orchestra interrupts the heavy polka, intended to calm the public's impatience, with the opening bars of a slow valse; as if obeying a signal, the two dogs adjust their position: they have recognised *their* valse. Cora gently swishes her tail, pricks her ears, and takes on the neutral expres-

sion, amiable and bored, which makes her resemble the portraits of Empress Eugénie. Manette, insolent, alert, rather too fat, awaits the painfully slow rise of the curtain and Harry's arrival on the scene, yawns, and starts panting at once, from exasperation and thirst.

The act begins, without incident, without rebellion. Cora, forewarned by a flick of the whip under her belly, does not cheat while taking her jumps. Manette walks on her front legs, vales, barks, and jumps a few obstacles erect on the back of the yellow collie. Their performance is commonplace, but correct; there is nothing to be said against it.

Inveterate grumblers may find fault, perhaps, with Cora's queenly aloofness, or with the small terrier's artificial zest. It's easy to see that such grouchers have not got months of touring in their paws, and know nothing of the horrors of guard's vans, hostels, bread-and-meat mash that distends but does not nourish, the long hours of waiting in railway stations, the too short constitutional walks, the iron collar, the muzzle, and above all the eternal waiting, the nerve-racking wait for exercise, for starting out, for food, for a thrashing. These exacting spectators ignore the fact that the life of performing animals is spent in waiting, and that this wears them out.

Tonight both dogs are waiting for nothing but the end of their turn. No sooner is the curtain down, than a pitched battle ensues. Harry returns to the scene just in time to part the pair of them, flecked with pink nips, their ribbons in tatters.

"It's something quite new for them, Madame, something they've picked up while they've been here," he cries in a fury. "As a rule they're very good friends, they sleep together in my hotel bedroom. But here, why it's only a small town, you see. You can't pick and choose here. The inn-keeper's wife said to me 'I'll put up with one dog, but I'll not take two!' So, as I like to deal fair, I let first one, then the other of my two bitches spend the night in the theatre, in a padlocked basket. They cottoned on to the rotation right away. And now, every night, they go through the high jinks you've just witnessed. All through the day they're as meek as lambs; as the hour approaches to buckle

one in, it's a fight to decide which won't be the one to stay behind in the locked basket; they'd tear each other to shreds, they're so jealous! And you've not seen the half of it! It's a proper show to watch the performance of the one I'm taking back with me, when she starts yapping her head off and scampering round the basket as I shut the lid on the other! I don't like to be unfair to animals, not me! I'd do anything rather than what I have to do here, but since there is nothing else for it, how can I?"

I did not see Manette tonight, as she took her leave, arrogant and radiating joy; but I did see the imprisoned Cora, rigid with repressed despair. Her lovely golden fleece was crumpled against the wicker sides of the basket, and through the bars at the top poked out her long, gentle, fox-like nose.

She listened to the receding sounds of her master's footsteps and Manette's tinkling bell. When the iron door finally closed behind them, she drew in a long breath to let out a howl; but she remembered that I was still there, and all I heard was a deep human sigh. Then she proudly closed her eyes and settled down for the night.

The Child Prodigy

"Really, there are a great many children in this show, I find; do you not agree, Madame?"

This remark is flung at me, in supercilious and superior tones, by a large blonde lady—*Spécialité, Valses lentes*—who for the moment is bundled in a crepon kimono costing seven francs fifty, the sort of kimono invariably found in all music-hall dressing-rooms. Hers is pink, with storks printed on it; mine is blue, sprinkled with small red and green fans, and that of the dove-trainer is mauve, with black flowers.

The stout, discontented lady has just been jostled by three kids no taller than fox hounds, dressed as Red Indians, who were rushing off to remove their make-up. But her bitter words were

directed at a silent creature, a sort of unhappy governess dressed all in black, slowly pacing up and down the corridor.

Having spoken, the stout lady gives a slight cough, in a most distinguished manner, and retires to her dressing-room, but not before throwing a last contemptuous glance at the governess, who shrugs her shoulders and smiles vaguely at me.

"She intended that remark for me. She finds there are too many children in the show! Very well, what about me in that case, I'm to start by removing my own child, I suppose!"

"What, you can't mean that you're dissatisfied? 'Princess Lily' is surely a success?"

"Yes, and don't I know it! My daughter is quite devastating, isn't she? Yes, she's my daughter, my real daughter. . . . Wait a second and I'll button you up at the back, you can't possibly manage it yourself! Besides, I'm in no hurry, myself. My daughter's gone to the hairdresser to have her ringlets set. I'd so much like to stay with you for a while. All the more, on account of her and me having had words just now."

In the mirror behind me I can see a plain humble face with moist eyes.

"She certainly answered me back just now! I tell you, Madame, that child fair takes me to pieces, for all that she's only thirteen. Oh, she don't look her age, I know, but then she's dressed to look so much younger on the stage. I'm not telling you all this to deny her, or to say anything against her.

"No flattery intended, but I'd be the first to agree that nothing could look sweeter or prettier than she does when she plays her piece on the violin in that white baby frock of hers. Or when she sings her Italian song—you've seen her, have you, in that little Neapolitan boy's costume? And her American dance, have you seen that too?"

"The public can soon tell the difference between a dainty number like my girl's and one like those three little miseries who've just gone rushing off. They're so scraggy, Madame, and they look so scared, too. Those frightened eyes they roll at the smallest mistake they make in their work! As I was saying only the other day to my Lily, 'They make a pitiful sight!' 'Phoui!' she gives me

for answer, 'they're not interesting.' I know well enough it's that competitive spirit in her that makes her say things like that, but all the same she comes out with remarks that knock the stuffing out of me.

"I'm telling you all this, but you'll keep it to yourself, you won't let it go any further, will you? I feel a bit nervy today because she's answered me back just now, me, her mother!

"Oh, I can't say I bless the man who put Lily on the stage! Fine gentleman though he is, and a good writer of plays. I used to work for his lady, by the day, embroidering fine linen. His lady was very kind to me, and allowed Lily to come and wait for me there when she came out of school.

"One day, it must be nearly four years since, the gentleman I was speaking of was on the look-out for a clever child to take a little girl's part in one of his plays, and for a lark he asked me for my Lily. . . . It was soon settled, Madame. My little girl had them all flabbergasted from the start. Poise, memory, proper intonation, she'd got all that and more. I didn't take it too serious at first till I heard they'd pay Lily up to eight francs a day. There was nothing you could say against that, was there?

"After that play came another, and then another. And every time I'd say 'After success like that, it's the last time Lily will act.' They all got after me. 'Now stop all this nonsense! Just drop that damned embroidery job of yours! Can't you see you've got a gold mine in that child! Not to mention you've no right to stifle a talent like hers.' And so on and so forth, till I hardly dared breathe. . . .

"And during that time, you should have seen the progress my little one made! Hobnobbing with the celebrities, and saying 'My dear' to the manager himself! And grave as a judge with it all, which made everyone split their sides.

"Then came the time, two years ago, when my daughter found herself out of a job. 'Thank the Lord,' I says to myself, 'now we can have a rest, and settle down on the nice little sum we've put by from the theatre.' I consult Lily, as was my duty; she'd already made a big impression on me with her knowing ways. Can you guess what she answered? 'My poor Mama, you must be

crackers! I shan't always be eleven, unfortunately. This is not the time to go to sleep. There's nothing doing in the theatre this season, but the music-hall's there all right, for me to have a go!

"As you may imagine, Madame, she didn't lack encouragement from these, and those, and especially the others, none of whose business it was! Gifted as she is, it didn't take her long to learn to dance and sing. Her chief worry is that she's growing up. I have to measure her every fortnight: she'd like so much to stay small! Only last month she flew into a rage because she'd put on two centimetres in the last year, and reproached me for not having made her a dwarf from birth.

"It's terrible, the manner of speaking she's picked up back stage, and her bossiness, too! She soon gets the upper hand, I being so weak. She argued back at me again today. She'd been that lah-di-dah in her answers, that for a moment I saw red and got on my high horse. 'And so what! I'm your mother, I'd have you know! And supposing I took you by the arm and put a stop to you going on with the theatre!'

"She was busy making up her eyes; she didn't even turn round, she just started to laugh. 'Stop me going on with the theatre? Ha! Ha! Ha! And I suppose you'd go on in my place and sing them *Chiribiribi* to pay the rent!'

"Tears came to my eyes, Madame: it's hard when one is humiliated by one's own flesh and blood. But it's not altogether that I feel so bad about. It's . . . I'm not sure how to explain what it is. There are times when I look at her and think 'She's my little daughter, and she's thirteen. She's been four years in show business. Rehearsals, back-stage tittle-tattle, unfair treatment on the part of the manager, rivalry between the stars, jealousy of her comrades, her posters, the band-leader who bears her a grudge, the call-boy who was too late—or too soon—with her bell, the clique, her costume-maker. . . . That's all she's had in her head and on her lips for the last four years. All these past four years I've never once heard her talk like a child. . . . And never, never, never again shall I hear her talk like a child—like a real child. . . ."

THE MISFIT

I

The stagehands called her "a choice piece"; but the Schmetz family—eight acrobats, their mother, wives, and "young ladies"—never mentioned her; Ida and Hector, "Duo Dancers", said severely, "She brings shame on the house." Jady, the "*diseuse*" from Montmartre, made use of her most rasping contralto to exclaim, on seeing her, "Well, what d'you know about that number!" and was quizzed in reply with imperious disdain, and the flashy deployment of a long ermine stole.

For the public this outcast was billed as "La Roussalka"; but for the entire Caf'-Con' personnel she became, on the spot, "Poison Ivy". Within the span of a mere six days the austere back-stage staff of the Élysée-Pigalle were at their wits' end, and deplored her superfluous presence. Dancer? Singer? Pah! Neither the one, nor t'other. . . .

"She displaces air, that's all!" Brague assured everyone.

She sang Russian songs and danced the *jota*, the *sevillana* and the *tango*, revised and corrected by an Italian ballet-master—Spanish, ollé! with a Frenchified flavour!

No sooner was Friday's band-call over, than the whole house was eyeing her askance. La Roussalka chose to rehearse in a carefully considered liberty gown and hat, hands in muff, indicating the *jota* with discreet little jerks of her hobble-skirted posterior, stopping abruptly to shout "That's not it, Jesus! That's not it!", stamping and screaming "Brutes!" at the members of the band.

Mutter Schmetz, who sat mending her sons' tights in the circle, could hardly be kept in her seat. "That, an *ardisde*! That, a *tanzer*! Ach! she is nozzings but a *dard*, yes?"

And La Roussalka continued, "with enough brazen cheek to gobble up her parents", to employ Brague's energetic metaphor, bullying the property man, cursing the electrician, demanding a blue flood on her entrance, and a red spot on her exit, and goodness knows what else!

"I've played all the big houses in Europe," she yelled, "and I've nevererrr seen a joint so disgrrrracefully rrrun!"

She rolled her 'r's' in a most insulting manner, as if she were chucking a handful of pebbles straight in your face.

During this rehearsal one saw nothing but La Roussalka, and heard nothing but La Roussalka. In the evening, however, it was discovered that there were two of them: opposite La Roussalka, dark, ablaze with purple spangles and imitation topazes, danced a soft, fair-haired child, graceful, light as air. "This is my sisterrr," La Roussalka declared, though no one had asked for enlightenment. Further, she had an offensive way of clinching matters, on her "worrrrd of honourrr", that shocked even her most candid listener.

Whether sister, servile poor relation, or a little dancer hired for a pittance—nobody knew or cared. She appeared, a mere chit of a girl, to be dancing in her sleep, docile as a lamb, pretty, with huge, vacant, brown eyes. At the end of the *sevillana*, she rested a moment against a flat, mouth agape, then noiselessly returned to the cellar, while La Roussalka started on her *tango*.

"What's more," Brague said for all to hear, "she dances with her hands!"

Hands, arms, hips, eyes, eyebrows, hair—her feet, being unskilled, did not know what they were up to. What saved the day for her was the cocksure flamboyance, the assured insolence of her least gesture. She congratulated herself if she made a false step, seemed highly delighted if she fluffed an entrechat and, back in the wings, gave herself no time to draw breath before starting to talk, talk, talk, and lie with all the abandon of a Southerner born in Russia.

She addressed herself to the world in general with the familiarity of a tipsy princess. She stopped one of the blond Schmetz boys, in his pale mauve tights, by laying both hands on his

shoulders, so that with lowered eyes and blushing, he dared not make good his escape; she forcibly drove Mutter Schmetz into a corner, only to be met with a volley of *Ja, Ja, Jas* as stinging as smacks in the face; the facetious stage-manager got more than he bargained for in the way of abuse, as did Brague, who kept whistling throughout her tirade.

"My family. . . . My native land. . . . I'm a Russian. . . . I speak fourteen languages, like all my compatriots. . . . I've gotten myself six thousand francs worth of stage-costumes for this wretched little number worth nothing at all. . . . But you should see, my dearr, all the town clothes I have! Money means nothing to me! . . . I can't tell you my real name: there's no knowing what might happen if I did! My father holds the most important position in Moscow. He's married, you know. Only he's not married to my mother. . . . He gives me everything I want. . . . You've seen my sister? She's a good-for-nothing. I beat her a lot, she won't work. All I can say is she's pure! On my life, she's that! . . . You none of you saw me last year in Berlin? Oh, that's where you should have seen me! A thirty-two-thousand-franc act, my dearr! With that blackguard Castillo, the dancer. He robbed me, on my worrrd of honourrr, he stole from me! But once across the Russian border and I told my father everything. Castillo was jugged! In Russia, we show no mercy to thieves. Jugged, I tell you, jugged! Like this!"

She went through the motions of turning a key in its lock, and her heavily violet-pencilled eyes sparkled with cruelty. Then, played out, she went down to her dressing-room where she relieved her nervous tension by giving her "sister" more than one good clout on the ears. Genuine stage slaps they were, resounding right enough, but they rang true on those young cheeks. They could be heard up on the stage. Mutter Schmetz, outraged, spoke of "gomblaining to de bolice" and pressed to her bosom two flaxen-haired lads of seven and eight, the youngest born of her flaxen-haired brood, as if "Poison Ivy" were about to give them a spanking.

By what noxious flames was this fiend of a woman consumed? Before the week was out, she had hurled a satin slipper at the

band-leader's head, referred to the secretary-general, in his hearing, as a "pimp" and, by accusing her dresser of stealing her jewellery, reduced the poor creature to tears. Gone were the quiet evenings of the Élysée-Pigalle and the peaceful slumbers of its cells behind closed doors! Gone for good! "Poison Ivy" had ruined everything.

"She's out for my blood, is she!" was Jady's bold threat. "Let me hear one single word from that one, no, not even that, let her so much as brush against me in the doorway, and I'll get her fired!"

Brague, for once, might well have supported Jady, for he could not stomach the unwarrantable success of La Roussalka, and the way she glittered among the mended tights, home-cleaned dresses, and smoke-blackened scenery, like a sham jewel in an imitation setting.

"I enjoy my rest," Ida whispered to Brague. "There's never been so much as a word uttered against my husband and me, you know that! Well then, I can assure you, that *when* I leave the stage, you know, *when* I carry Hector off standing on my hands, and I catch sight of 'Poison Ivy' sniggering at the two of us, it wouldn't need much for me to drop Hector plonk on her head!"

Nobody bothered any more about the little blonde "sister", who never uttered a word and danced like a sleep-walker between one stinging blow and the next. She was to be met with in the corridors, her shoulder weighed down by a slop-pail or a pitcher full of water, shuffling along in bedraggled old slippers, her petticoats trailing behind her.

But after the show, La Roussalka rigged her out in a loosely belted dress, too voluminous for her flat-chested figure, and a hat that came half way down her back, and whisked her off, red-cheeked from her drubbing and gummy-eyed, to the night-haunts on the Butte de Montmartre. There she made her sit down docile and half-asleep, with cocktails in front of her, and once again, to the cynical amazement of chance "friends", she started to talk and talk and tell lies.

"My father . . . the most influential man in Moscow. . . .

I speak fourteen languages. . . . I myself never tell lies; but my compatriots, the Russians, are one and all liars. . . . I've sailed twice round the world on a princely yacht. . . . My jewels are all in Moscow, for my family forbids me to wear them on the stage, because of the ducal coronets on every piece. . . ."

Meanwhile the little sister dozed on half-awake. From time to time she almost took a somersault when one of the "friends" tried to squeeze her thin waist or stroke her bare neck, pale mauve with pearl powder. Her surprise unloosed the rage of La Roussalka.

"Wake up, you, where do you think you are? Jesus! what a life, having to drag this child around with me!"

Calling to witness not only the "friends", but the restaurant at large, she shouted "Look at her there, that good-for-nothing! This table couldn't hold the piles of dough I've spent on her! I'm reduced to tears the whole day long because she will do nothing, nothing, nothing!"

The slapped child never batted an eyelid. Of what youthful past, or of what escape, was she dreaming behind her mysteriously vacant, huge brown eyes?

II

"This child," Brague decrees, "is a kid we'll stick in the chorus. One more, one less, it makes little difference. She'll always earn her forty sous . . . though I don't much like having to deal with misfits. . . . I say this now so's it's known another time."

Brague speaks pontifically, in his dark kingdom of the Élysée-Pigalle, where his double function of mime and producer assure him undisputed authority.

The "misfit", or so it would seem, pays no heed to his words. Her vague thanks are expressed in a meaningless smile that does not spread to her large eyes, the colour of clouded coffee, and she lingers on, arms limp, twiddling the handle of a faded bag.

She has just this moment been christened by Brague: henceforth she will be known as "Misfit". A week ago she was the "good-for-nothing little sister"; she gains by the change.

Little matter, for she discourages malice, and even attention, this foundling who has just been dumped down here, without a sound, by "La Roussalka, her sister", who went off leaving her with three torn silk under-slips, a couple of "latest models" sizes too big for her, a pair of evening shoes with Strass paste buckles, not to mention a hat, and the key to the room they occupied together in the Rue Fontaine.

La Roussalka, *alias* "Poison Ivy", that human hurricane, that storm-cloud charged with hail ready to burst at the least shock, has shown in her flight a strange discretion, by removing her four large trunks, her "family papers", the portrait of her *fatherrr* "who controls rain and sunshine in Moscow", while forgetting the little sister who danced with her, docile, half asleep, and somehow weighed down by blows.

"Misfit" neither wept nor wailed. She stated her case to the lady manager in a few words and with a Flemish accent exactly suited to her blonde sheep-like appearance. Madame did not overflow with maternal protestations or pitying indignation, any more than did Jady, the *diseuse*, or Brague himself. "Misfit" has attained the age of eighteen, and is therefore old enough to go out alone and look after her own affairs.

"Eighteen!" Jady grumbled, suffering from a hangover and bronchitis. "Eighteen, and she expects me to take pity on her!"

Brague, a good fellow at heart, felt more kindly disposed. "Forty sous, did I say? We'll bloody well give three francs, so's to give her time to look round."

Since then "Misfit" comes every day, at one, to sit in one of the canvas-covered stalls of the Élysée-Pigalle, and wait. When Brague calls out "On stage, the great *hetairae*!", she climbs on to the gangway that spans the orchestra pit and sits down at a sticky zinc table such as is used in low pubs. In the pantomime now in rehearsal she will take the part, wearing a reconditioned pink gown, of an "elegant customer" at a Montmartre cabaret.

She can hardly be seen from the auditorium, since she has

been placed at the very back of the stage, behind the huge, seedy-looking hats of the other ladies of the chorus. The stage-hand sets in front of her an empty glass and a spoon, and there she poses, her childish chin resting on a dubiously gloved hand.

She is a thoroughly safe customer. She doesn't jabber on the stage, never complains of the icy draught whistling round her legs, nor has she either the unhappy look of young Miriam, so furiously hungry that it seems to demand food, or Vanda's feverish activity, Vanda the Cluck, for ever producing from her pocket a baby's sock in need of darning, or a flannelette brassière that she mends while trying to hide it.

"Misfit" has fallen into oblivion again, apparently thankful at last to be able to roll up into a ball, as though the general indifference has spared her the trouble of existing. She speaks even less than the star dancer from Milan, a heavy woman, pitted with smallpox and plastered with holy medals and coral callosities. Her silence, at any rate, is born of contempt, she being interested solely in the "five points", the *entrechats-six*, the whole graceless and laborious range of acrobatics that exercise the sailor's muscles on her calves.

Up stage, Brague is doing his level best not to husband an ounce of his energy. "Isn't he lucky to sweat like that!" sighs the wretched brat Miriam, white with cold under her rouge. Brague sweats in vain at his miming. He wears himself out trying to communicate his faith, his feverish enthusiasm, to the little tart in her hairless fur, to the stubborn mender of baby socks, to the arrogant ballerina. He insists—oh, the folly of it!—that Miriam, Vanda, and the Italian should at least appear to take an interest in the action of his piece.

"I'm telling you . . . Good God! I'm trying to tell you this is the moment when these two characters are starting to fight! When two chaps start a fight close beside you, doesn't it affect you more than that? Good God, do stir your stumps! At least say Ah! as you would when there's a brawl in a pub and you pick up your skirts ready to fly!"

After the sound and the fury of an hour's effort, Brague takes a rest, finding some compensation in running through his big

scene, the scene where he reads the letter from his mother. Joy and surprise, then terror, and finally despair, are depicted on features seamed with such intensity of expression, such excess of pathos, that Vanda stops sewing, Miriam slapping the soles of her feet, and the Italian dancer, swathed in a grey woollen shawl, deigns to leave the framework of a flat to watch Brague's tears flow. A minor daily triumph, delectable all the same.

On each such an occasion, however, a faint chortle like a smothered laugh has spoilt this affecting moment. Brague's sharp ear caught it from the very first day.

The second day: "Which of you ladies is the chucklehead that's convulsed with laughter?" he shouts. No answer, and the dismal faces of the "great hetairae" reveal nothing.

The third day: "There's a fine of forty sous about to fall on somebody's nut—and I know very well who it is—for causing a disturbance during rehearsal!" But Brague does not know who it is.

The fourth day: "You there, Misfit, are you trying to get a rise out of me?" Brague storms. "You wear yourself to a shadow, yes, you strive to put into what you're doing a little . . . of the tragic side of life, of . . . simple truth and beauty, you try to pull the mimodrama out of the common rut, only to succeed in what? In reducing misfits like you to a state of hopeless giggles!"

A chair falls, and the pale trembling form of Misfit rises from out of the Stygian gloom, bleating like a goat. "But Mon . . . Monsieur Brague, I . . . I'm not laughing, I'm crying!"

III

*I'm really a wonderful guy,
So fond of the kiddies am I,
The nice sweet little dears . . .
Garn, the little perishers!*

"Misfit" leans against an iron strut, swaying like a small chained bear as she automatically rubs her powdered shoulder-blades to and fro against the cold metal. She listens, while gazing from a distance at the character whom the Compère is about to introduce to the Commère as a choice tit-bit, by gently pressing forefinger to thumb as if he held between them a folded butterfly.

"Plebiscites are all the fashion, my dear friend: I am happy to present to you tonight the man who, by an impressive majority, has been newly elected the Prince of Mirth—our joyous friend, adventurer and companion—Sarracq!"

'The frock-coat don't fit him half as well as Raffort,' thinks Misfit. 'And you could see even then it hadn't been made to fit Raffort.'

She notes the difference between the pearl-grey frock-coat that hangs too long and loose on Sarracq and the violet silk tail-coat that trusses the stout body of the Compère, who does his best, by rounding his arms and shoulders, to conceal the shortness of his sleeves. As he steps up on to the stage again, his back to the public, he turns sideways and draws in his waist, to ease the tightness of the knee-breeches that are squeezing the life out of him.

An ominous heat hangs heavy on the close of the evening performance. The exasperation is due not so much to the storm that is about to break into a torrential downpour, as to the fact that it is one more August night in a succession of cloudless days and nights without a drop of rain. It is a merciless summer heat that has slowly penetrated through the dim recesses of the wings down to the musty lower regions of the Empyrée-Palace. The performers know it well. Shouts of laughter are no longer heard; even the chorus-girls' dressing-rooms, wide open to the corridors, no longer resound with the tumult of invigorating slanging-matches. From the Commère to the grips and flymen, all creep about cautiously, with the economy of movement of shipwrecked people determined to harbour the last ounce of their strength.

"Matinée tomorrow!" thinks "Misfit." She droops her head like a cab-horse and, without seeing them, gazes down at her

satin shoes already agape where the big toes poke through. She is revived by the refreshing whiff of ether and smelling salts. "Yes, of course, for Elsie, who's a bit off colour. She's struck lucky, as you might say! She's through with it for the evening!"

Four skinny little creatures, in embroidered linen frocks, put in an appearance one after the other on the iron stairs. Their silent passage seems to attract "Misfit" like a magnet, and she follows them as if sleep-walking. With the same uncertain step, they file on to the stage one after the other, sing an indistinct little ditty about the games little girls get up to, at the same time kicking up their legs and baby-frock skirts, and then return breathless to the wings.

When "Misfit", leaning against her iron stay, exhales an almost inaudible, desperate "Oh, this heat!", one of the four *Babies* breaks into a nervous laugh, as if "Misfit" had said something terribly funny.

The Summer Revue, condemned to survive until the first of September, is in the throes of its last agony. It plays to pitiful second houses where some two hundred spectators, dispersed over the echoing auditorium, eye one another with embarrassment and disappear before the Grand Finale. It comes to life again on certain Saturdays, or a rainy Sunday, when the galleries are crammed with a malodorous crowd.

With prudence verging on the cynical, the management has removed one by one from the cast all the expensive stars of the original production. The English male dancer turned up his nose at the Parisian summer; the operetta star now gives Trouville the benefit of her soprano; a hundred performances have exhausted relays of Commères. Sarracq, idol of the Left Bank, has stepped into the frock-coat of Raffort, who himself had succeeded the English dancer, and thus elevated to top of the bill a name quite honestly unknown on this side of the bridges.

Only the costumes have not been renewed, the costumes and "Misfit". Ever since the day when her temperamental sister, the *danseuse*, deposited her on the theatre doorstep three years since, "Misfit" has been part of the house, appearing in the chorus of

all the Revues, Pantomimes and Ballets. Luck had it one day that the manager took notice of her to the extent of enquiring "And what's that little girl over there?"

"She's one of the three francs thirty-threes," the stage-manager replied.

As from the day following a dazzled "Misfit" had her salary raised from a hundred to a hundred and sixty francs a month. This change entailed putting in an appearance for endless hours spent in bovine rumination, or in work more stultifying than abject idleness—parades, chorus routine, or plastic poses. Summer and winter alike come and go without releasing her, and her soft young eyelids are already swollen by fatigue into two lymphatic pouches. She is sweet and gentle, with large submissive eyes, so much so that the stage-manager refers to her by turns as "the cream of the regulars," or "the dumb-bell of the duds".

Tonight she is feeling the heat like the rest of the world, and even more than the others because she has eaten next to nothing. The mere thought of her dinner makes her feel sick; she imagines she is still sitting at an outside table with an untouched plate of hot beef going cold in front of her. There are also the green peas that smell of wet dog. She shakes the curls of her thick wig against her cheeks and slowly starts towards the iron stairs. She is in no haste to quit the spot where she is slowly, peacefully, fading away in a sort of funereal security. Before going down below, she risks a peep through the curtain slit and murmurs apprehensively, "Oh, it's packed full of savages again tonight!"

The fact is "Misfit" is afraid of summer audiences. She knows that the regular quiet shop-keepers who frequent the Empyrée-Palace relinquish their seats in August to strange hordes of foreigners whose raucous hubbub during the intervals she finds disquieting. She has an equal horror of rough Teutonic beards, Oriental hard blue-black hair-pads and oily skins, and impenetrable Negro smiles. . . . It must be the heat that brings them, with all the other scourges of these dog-days.

"Misfit" is not ignorant of the fact that "savages", in the deserted streets after midnight, follow and solicit pale and anae-

mic little chorus girls, whose theatre salary is three francs thirty-three a day.

"One's got to live, of course," thinks "Misfit", with her sorry nag's resignation. "But not with these, not with those, not those *savages!*"

She has quite made up her mind to go home alone, come what may. However worn out she may be, she will walk as far as Caulaincourt on the other side of the bridge. There her scorching small room awaits her, at the very top of a boarding-house overlooking the Montmartre cemetery. The thin walls keep the heat all night long and what wind there is brings factory smoke only.

It is not a room to live in, let alone to sleep in. But "Misfit" has bought a half pound of plums, and these she will eat all alone, in her chemise, beside the window. . . . This is her one summer luxury. She plays the game of squeezing the stones between finger and thumb and then seeing how far she can shoot them, even as far as the cemetery. When, in the silence before dawn, she hears a stone rebound from an iron crucifix and strike with a musical ring a glass pane of the chapel, she smiles as she says to herself "I've won!"

FROM THE FRONT

"La Fenice"

"What is there to do tonight?"

Drenched throughout the day, Naples has been steaming like a dirty bath. The bay lies flattened by the continual rain, and Capri has melted away behind the rigid silvery downpour. A spectacular curtain of bluish-purple cloud veils and unveils Vesuvius from

view and trails on down as far as the sea, where it finally shrouds the sky, crushing, as the sun sets, the living red rose that lay half open in its midst.

The tinkle of a bell echoes through the empty white hotel where we brave cholera and hail squalls. We could run or bowl a hoop down the interminable corridor under the dreary eye of the German waiters. We have the billiard-room to ourselves and the bar—where the man in the white waistcoat is asleep—all the lifts and the crinkly-haired chambermaids with lovely eyes and fat shiny noses. We own the dining-room—with places laid for two hundred guests—isolated from us by a three-fold screen that prevents our seeing the half-acre of polished parquet floor, dazzlingly bright . . . but . . .

“What is there to do tonight?”

In the first place, consult the barometer. Then, forehead pressed against the French window of the verandah, gaze out over the flooded quayside to watch, swaying in its iron gibbet, the electric globe big as a mauve moon as it swings in the wind.

Between one gusty squall and the next, a voice sings *Bella mia* and *Fa me dormi*: a child's voice, shrill, metallic, nasal, sustained by mandolins. All of a sudden I am startled to see, on the other side of the window pane, a forehead pressed against mine, two eyes trying to look into my eyes, a pair of dark eyes under the weatherbeaten disorder of picturesque hair: the young girl who was singing has come up the terrace steps in search of her half lira. I open the door a little way; the child has barely slipped in before she makes good her escape, after a confidently suppliant gesture, a quick, utterly feminine, almost blush-making glance of appraisal. She glistens with rain-drops under her stiff mantle with its pointed hood; a smell of ponds and soaking wet wool has come in with her.

“What is there to do tonight? Tell me, say something, what can we do tonight?”

Half an hour later we find ourselves stranded at “*La Fenice*”, a Caf'-Con' of moderate size, plastered all over—walls, drop-curtain, passages—with posters glorifying a local liqueur in a riot of publicity. Insipid in design, the outmoded silhouettes of

the women displayed, high-bosomed and high-waisted, suffice to make us feel suddenly very far from Paris, and a little lost.

Despite two glaring flood-lights, the place as a whole remains dismal; there are exactly three women in the audience, two little countrified, shabbily dressed tarts and myself. But the men are there in their hordes! While waiting for the curtain to rise they laugh uproariously, hum to the rhythm of the band, shake hands with one another, and bandy quips across the house; here reigns the familiarity found in places of ill repute.

But, on the programme, what a regiment of women! And what lovely Italian names, Gemma la Bellissima, Lorenza, Lina, Maria! Among this bevy I madly hope for red-haired Venetian beauties with pink-and-white skins, Roman goddesses pale under raven black hair, Florentines with aristocratic chins. . . . Alas! . . .

Against a crudely painted blackcloth, on which I certainly never expected this scene of a French château mirrored in the Loire, file past Lina, Maria, Lorenza, and Gemma la Bellissima, and countless others. The frailest of them humiliates the caryatids that support the balcony. Here, the solid is patently preferred. So much so that I suspect Lorenza di Gloria of having supplied, with considerable aid from cotton wadding and rolled-up handkerchiefs, a suitable substitute for what is lacking in the still angular body of a young Jewess; for she waves a pair of skinny arms, yellow under the armpits, round and about an enormous bust and all along inflated hips draped in woven satin, violet and gold.

A shattering storm of applause greets—but why?—Gemma la Bellissima, a flaccid dancing-girl in green gauze. She is “the Dancer in the Nude”, whose bashful antics are noisily acclaimed and accompanied, while her reserved smile acts as an apology for having to display so much! At one moment, turning her too white back to the audience, she goes so far as to attempt a lascivious wriggle; but she quickly turns round again, as though wounded by the glances, to resume, eyes suitably lowered, her little game as a modest washerwoman, wringing and shaking out her spangled veil.

The local star performer is worth listening to, and looking at as well. She is Maria X, an Italian approaching her fifties, still beautiful, and cleverly made-up. I cannot deny, nor do I reject, the appeal of her well-trained voice, already going, and of her over-demonstrative gestures. Nor will I dispute that she possesses a natural instinct for mime which enables her to "convey the meaning" with face, shoulders, curve of the waist, plump yet responsive legs, but above all with her hands; indefatigable hands that mould, weigh, and caressingly stroke the empty air, while her weary features, bright, seductive, express laughter or tears, or become creased with wrinkles regardless of the cracks they create in her heavy make-up, till with a single knife-edged glance, with a contraction of her proud velvety eyebrows, she compels the lustful attention of the entire audience.

"Lucette de Nice." . . . I have been looking forward to the appearance of the little French girl who bears such a pretty, childish name. Here she is. Slimness personified—at last! Rather misery-stricken in her short and heavily spangled dress, she sings hackneyed Parisian ditties. Where have I seen this slovenly yet graceful errand-girl before, with no nose to speak of, and a sulky look as though she were afraid? At Olympia, perhaps? Or at the Gaîté-Rochechouart?

Lucette de Nice. . . . She knows but one gesture, a curious scooping movement of the hand, not unlike a cat, preposterous but somehow pleasing. Where have I seen her? Her roving eyes encounter mine, and her smile leaves her lips to be transferred to her large blue-pencilled eyes. She has recognised me too, and never again takes her eyes off me. She gives no further thought to her words. I can read on her poor-little-girl features the longing to join me, to talk to me. When she comes to the end of her song she gives me a fleeting smile, like someone about to cry, then hurriedly leaves the stage, knocking her arm against the entrance.

After that, there is yet another heavy, healthy girl, full of confidence but not fully awake, who scatters among the audience stalkless flowers attached to light pliable reeds. She is followed by a female acrobat, undisguisedly pregnant, who appears to find

her act a torture and takes her bow with a distraught look on a face beaded with sweat.

Too many women, oh, far too many women! I could wish this flock enlivened by some fruity Neapolitan comic or the inevitable tenor with blue hair. Five or six poodles would not spoil the show, nor would a *cornet-à-piston* player who tries out his skill on a box of cigars.

Such a welter of females becomes depressing! One sees them at too close range, one's thoughts go out to them. My eyes wander from the threadbare false hem to the tarnished gilt of a girdle, from the dim little ring to the pink-dipped white coral necklace. And then my eye lights on the red wrists under a coat of wet white, on hands hardened by cooking, washing, and sweeping; I surmise the laddered stockings and the leaf-thin soles; I imagine the grimy stairs leading up to the fireless room and the short-lived light of the candle. . . . While gazing up at the present singer, I see the others, all the others. . . .

"What do you say to our leaving?"

The deluge continues. A raging gale drives the downpour under the raised hood of our carriage as we go bouncing away, drawn by a devil-possessed crazy small black nag, that seems hell-bent under the encouragement of the frenzied bellowings of a hump-backed cabby.

"Gitanette"

Ten o'clock. There has been so much smoking in the Semiramis Bar tonight that my compote of apples has a vague flavour of Virginian cigarettes. . . . It is Saturday night. A kind of holiday-fever exists among the regulars in anticipation of the rest-day tomorrow, that exceptional day so unlike all the others, with the long lie in bed in the morning, the drive-out in a taxi-cab as far as the Pavillon-Bleu, the visit to relations, the outing for the kids shut up in some suburban boarding-school who will be

coming, on this lovely Sunday morning, to have a breath of the fresh invigorating air of Le Châtelet.

Semiramis herself is up to her eyes in work, and has already put on a monster stock-pot to serve as the main basis for her Sunday dinners. "Thirty pounds of beef, my dear, and the giblets of half a dozen chickens! That should keep them going for some time, I'm thinking, and allow me a few moments' peace, for I'll be able to serve it first as the main course for dinner, and then cold with salad for supper. And as for soup, just think of all the soup they'll be able to have!" She is by now much calmer, smoking her everlasting cigarette as she parades from table to table her good ogress smile and her whisky-and-soda, from which unthinkingly she takes an occasional sip. The strong bitter coffee is getting cold in my cup; my bitch, her nose running from the cigarette smoke, urges me to leave.

"You don't recognise me?" says a voice close beside me.

A young woman, simply, almost poorly clad in black, is looking at me with enquiring eyes. It is hard to tell the true colour of her hair under her matted-straw hat trimmed with quills; she is wearing a white collar with a neat tie, and her pearl-grey gloves are slightly soiled.

Her face is powdered, her lips are rouged, her eyelashes darkened with mascara: the indispensable make-up, but applied without due consideration, of necessity, from force of habit. I ransack my memory, when suddenly the lovely eyes, with huge pupils the shimmering dark brown of Semiramis' coffee, bring me the answer.

"Why, of course, you're Gitanette!"

Her name, her absurd music-hall name, has come back to me, and with it the memory of where we met.

It must have been three or four years ago, at the time I was playing in the *Empyrée Pantomime*, that Gitanette occupied the dressing-room next to mine. Gitanette and her girl-friend, "A Duo in *Cosmopolitan Dances*", used to dress with their door open on to the passage to get more air. Gitanette took the male parts and her girl-friend—Rita, Lina, Nina?—appeared, turn by turn, as a drab, as an Italian, then in red leather Cossack boots,

and finally draped in a Manilla shawl, a carnation behind her ear. A nice little pair, or should I say "little couple", for there are certain ways and looks that tell their own story and, in addition, the authority assumed by Gitanette, the tender, almost maternal care with which she would wrap a thick woollen scarf round her girl-friend's neck. As for the friend, Nina, Rita, or Lina, I have rather forgotten her. Peroxided hair, light coloured eyes, white teeth, something about her of an appetising but slightly vulgar young washerwoman.

They danced neither very well nor very badly, and their story was that of a mass of other "Dance Numbers". Provided they are both young and agile, with a mutual distaste for the "*bar à femmes*" and the "*promenoir*", then's the time for them to collect their few pennies together to pay the ballet-master so much a week to arrange a special dance routine, and the dressmaker. . . . Then, if they are very, very lucky, the couple starts on the round of the various establishments in Paris, the provinces, and abroad.

Gitanette and her girl-friend were "playing" the *Empyrée* that month. For thirty nights running they bestowed on me all the discreet, disinterested attentions, the shy, reserved courtesy which seem to thrive exclusively among music-hall people. I would be dabbing on the last touch of rouge under my eyes when they came up, lips still trembling from lack of breath and temples moist, and stopped to smile at me without at first speaking, both panting like circus ponies. When recovered a little, they gave me politely, by way of greeting, some brief and useful piece of information: "An eighteen carat audience tonight!" or else "They're a lousy lot today!"

Then Gitanette, before taking off her clothes, would unlace her friend's bodice and Nina, or Lina, at once began to laugh and swear and jabber. "You'll have to watch your step," she'd shout across to me, "those roller-skaters have gone and cut the boards to pieces again tonight, and you'll be darned lucky if you don't come a cropper!" The voice of Gitanette took up the tale, more soberly, "It's a sure sign of luck if you fall flat on your face on the stage. It means you'll come back to the same place

before three years are out. That happened to me at Les Bouffes in Bordeaux, when I caught my foot in one of the cuts. . . .”

They lived out loud, quite simply, in the next room to mine with their door left wide open. They twittered like busy, affectionate birds, happy to be working together and to have the shelter of each other's arms and their love as a protection against the barren life of the prostitute and the occasional tough customer.

My thoughts went back to those old days as Gitanette stood before me, alone and sad, and so changed. . . .

“Sit down a minute, Gitanette, we'll have a coffee together. . . . And . . . where is your friend?”

She shakes her head as she sits down. “We're not together any more, my friend and me. You never heard what happened to me?”

“No, I've heard nothing. Would it be impertinent to ask?”

“Oh, good gracious, no. You see, you're an artiste like me . . . like I was, that is, for at present I'm not even a woman any more.”

“Are things as bad as that?”

“Things are bad, if you like to put it that way. It all depends what sort of person you are. I'm by nature the sort who becomes terribly attached, you see. I became terribly attached to Rita, she meant everything to me. It never entered my head that things could change between us. . . . The year it all happened we'd just had a real stroke of luck. We'd hardly finished dancing at the Apollo, when up popped Saloman, our agent, who sent us word that we were to have a dance routine in the *Empyrée Revue*, a gorgeous revue, twelve hundred costumes, English Girls, everything. For my part, I wasn't so mad keen to dance in it. I've always been a bit afraid of these big shows with so many females in them, for it always leads to rivalries, quarrels, or mischief of some sort. At the end of a fortnight in that *Revue*, I wanted nothing so much as to be back in the quiet little number we'd been doing before. All the more because little Rita was no longer the same with me; she'd go visiting round here and there, palling up with this girl or that, till it was the bubbly she went

for in the dressing-room of Lucie Desrosiers, that great roan mare, who was poisoning herself with the drink and whose stays had all their whale-bones broken. Champagne at twenty-three sous a bottle! Does anyone suppose you can get hold of any decent stuff at that price? The little one was going all lah-di-dah; there was no holding her. Dashed if she doesn't come back to our dressing-room one evening, bragging that the Commère had given her the glad eye! Now I ask you, was that very bright on her part, or very proper to me? I got ever so low spirited and began seeing the bad side in everything. I'd have given I don't know how much for a good date in Hamburg, or at the Wintergarten in Berlin, or almost any place to get us out of the big Revue that seemed never to be going to finish!"

Gitanette turns to look at me with her dark-coffee-coloured eyes, which seem to have lost all their keenness and vitality.

"I'm telling things just as they happened, you know. Don't run away with the idea I've made up this or that detail about anyone, or that there's any malice intended."

"No, of course not, Gitanette."

"That's good to hear. Well, came the day when my little bitch of a pal says to me: 'Listen, Gitanette,' she says, 'I need an underskirt (we still wore underskirts in those days) and a natty one too. I'm ashamed to put on the one I have!' As was only proper, I was the one who kept the key of the cash-box, otherwise where would our meals have come from! I simply said to her: 'Now about this underskirt, it will cost you how much?'—'How much, how much!' she shouts back at me in a rage. 'Why you'd think I hadn't even the right to buy myself an underskirt!' After a start like that, I saw we were in for a scene. To cut it short, I just tell her: 'Here's the key, take what you want, but don't forget we've got the monthly rent to pay tomorrow.' She takes out a fifty-franc note, flings on her things helter skelter, and off she rushes, to get to the Galeries Lafayette, supposedly, before the rush hour! Meanwhile I stay behind to run over a couple of costumes just back from the dyers, and I stitch and I stitch, while waiting for her to come back . . . When all of a sudden I see I'll have to replace a whole ninon underflounce in

Rita's dress, and I dash down to the nearest shop in the Place Blanche, it being already dark. . . . Simply telling you the story brings it all back clear as the moment it took place! As I come out of the shop, I only just escape being squashed flat by a taxi that draws into the kerb and comes to a stop, and then what do I see? Lo and behold, before my very eyes, that great Desrosiers getting out of the cab, her hair disshevelled, her dress all undone, and waving goodbye to Rita, to my Rita who is still sitting inside the taxi! I was that taken by surprise, I stood rooted to the spot, cut off at the legs, I couldn't budge. So much so that when I tried to make a sign, to attract Rita's attention, the taxi was already far away, it was taking Rita back to our place in the Rue Constance. . . .

"I'm all in a daze when I get back home; and of course she was already there, Rita, that is. You should have seen the look on her face . . . no, you have to know her as well as I know her, to see what . . .

"There, let's leave it at that! So I act simple and I say to her: 'What about that underskirt of yours?'—'I never bought it.'—'And what about that fifty francs?'—'I lost it.' She fires this off point blank, looking me straight in the eye! Oh, you can't imagine what it was like, you can't imagine. . . ."

Gitanette lowers her eyes and nervously stirs the spoon in her cup.

"You can't imagine what a blow it was to me, when she came out with that. It was like I'd seen the whole thing with my own eyes; their meeting place, the taxi ride, that one's furnished room, the champagne on the night-table, everything, everything."

She goes on repeating under her breath "Everything, everything," till I interrupt her. "And then what did you do?"

"Nothing. I cried my eyes out over dinner, into my mutton and beans. . . . And then, a week later, she left me. *Fortunately* I got so ill that I almost pegged out, for if I hadn't of, though I loved her so much, I'd have killed her. . . ."

She speaks calmly of killing, or of dying, all the time turning her spoon in the cup of cold coffee. This simple girl, who lives so close to nature, knows full well that all that is required to

sever the threads of misery is one single act, so easy, hardly an act of violence. A person is dead, just as a person is alive, except that death is a state that can be chosen, whereas a person is not free to choose their own life.

"Did you really want to die, Gitanette?"

"Of course I did. Only I was so ill, you understand, I wasn't able to. And then, later, my granny came to look after me and nurse me through my convalescence. She's an old lady, you see, I didn't dare leave her."

"And now, at the present time, you are less sad than you were?"

"No," Gitanette answers, dropping her voice. "And I don't even want to be less sad. I should be ashamed of myself if I found consolation after loving my friend the way I did. You're sure to tell me, as so many others have told me, 'Do something to take your mind off it. Time is the great healer.' I'll not deny that time does straighten things out in the long run, but there again it all depends on what sort of person you are. You see, I've known nobody but Rita, it just happened that way. I never had a boy-friend, I know nothing about children, I lost my parents when I was quite young, but when I used to see lovers happy together, or parents with little children on their knees, I'd say to myself 'I've got everything they've got, because I've my Rita.' No doubt about it, my life is finished in that respect, nothing can alter it. Each time I go back to my room at Granny's and see my pictures of Rita, the photos of us two in all our numbers, and the little dressing-table we shared, it starts up all over again, the tears come. . . . I cry, I call out to her. . . . It does me no good, but I can't help it. It may sound funny, but . . . I don't believe I'd know what to do with myself if I didn't have my sorrow. It keeps me company."

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MITSOU

Translated by Raymond Postgate

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I

Date: May, during the first Great War. The "Empyrée" in Montmartre is putting on its great Springtime Revue, *Hips and Haws*, and for that it has taken on eighteen young women, one young compère guaranteed unfit "through chest trouble", and a tragedy-actor aged eighty, for the indispensable parts of "Old Man Victory", "A Soldier of Napoleon" and "Marshal Joffre".

The dressing-room of Miss Mitsou, the star. Wallpaper: an imitation pink-and-white *toile de Jouy*; that is, when it was pink and white. Mitsou never knew those days. A sort of trestle for a table, covered with face-towels. Wash-stand, a maid's basin and jug. Face-powder in cardboard containers. A ring, with a very fine diamond, in among the eyebrow pencils and boxes of rouge. A small divan about as soft as a park bench; two cane chairs, painted. A general air of "that'll do, anyway".

Time: The interval. Mitsou is resting, alone. She is wearing strawberry coloured stockings sewn on to her tights by the tops, a pair of gilt shoes and a mauve crepon kimono. Nature has given Mitsou all the advantages that fashion is demanding: very small nose, large eyes as black as her hair, round cheeks, a small, sulky, fresh mouth—that is her face. For the figure what is required is a slender body with long and well-shaped legs, and small and low-slung breasts; well, she has all that with only the small defect of a slight skinniness above the knee. But the thirties will fill up those page-boy's thighs, and also the back that is like an anaemic nymph's; Mitsou is only twenty-four.

Mitsou is alone, sitting at her dressing table. Her legs, opened in a V, are held stiff so as not to strain the stockings, but her

young back bends and her neck falls forward, as if she were a thirsty gazelle. Motionless, Mitsou would hardly seem to be alive, if she didn't occasionally powder her cheeks, paint red on her mouth, and pick out the corner of her eye with a pencil. The busy hand is not thinking of anything, nor are the big, dark, shining eyes, nor is the melancholy, peaceful face.

A noise in the corridor, a limping step. A knock on the door by an old, dry hand. Boudou, the call-boy.

BOUDOU (*half-opening the door. He is seventy-two and looks older*): Interval's over. You're on soon, Miss Mitsou.

MITSOU (*coming to, slowly*): Thank you, Boudou. Is your foot better?

BOUDOU: Not much better. If there's no change by Thursday, I'll wash 'um and I'll put on a woollen sock and a cotton sock on top of it. Try anything once; that's my motto.

He goes away, leaving the door half open. A noise of soft shoes in the corridor. In the half-light there passes Beautey, the eighty-year-old actor. He stops for a moment, and the light-bulb in the dressing-room shows up the gorgeous uniform of the Imperial Guard, and also Beautey's blood-shot eyes and his disgusting blubber-lip.

BEAUTEY (*to Mitsou*): Everything all right, m'dear?

MITSOU (*hurriedly looking closely into her mirror*): Yes, yes, Mr. Beautey; thank you so much. . . . Oh dear, I am going to be late.

BEAUTEY: Would you like me to help you?

MITSOU (*scared*): No, no, Mr. Beautey; don't trouble. . . . What a thing to suggest!

(*He goes out.*)

MITSOU (*shuddering*): I'd rather die than look straight at him. People as old as that shouldn't be allowed about. It isn't really decent. And I'm so sensitive I even can't bear to look when a horse falls down in the street.

A noise in the corridor of ten small wooden heels. The Five Tireliri Girls run by in a very pleasant English rout. Mitsou is blasé and doesn't notice. Then there pass, one after the other, "War Bread", "Paper Shortage", "Saccharine", and the young

actor with the weak chest. . . . There enters an Old Lady in wooden shoes, with a decoration on her shabby fur tippet; she is the Dresser.

Finally, a noise, and with it a series of squeaks like a nest of mice disturbed; and into the dressing-room bursts Bit-of-Fluff. Is Bit-of-Fluff plain or pretty? A good figure or not? She is a scrap of woman whose incessant and intentional writhing prevents you making any judgment on things like that. Dyed hair in a cloud comes almost down to her nose, which anyway turns up to meet it. Mascara'd lashes, clown's cheekbones, the corners of her mouth—they all turn up, as if they had been blown by a gust of wind. Her shoulders quiver, her bottom dances, her hands grasp her breasts (to hold them or to call attention to them?) and if her knees rub against each other, is it because Fluff is cold? or is playing for a laugh? or is just knock-kneed? No way of telling. If Fluff were to fall in the Seine, her closest friends couldn't identify her in the morgue. For nobody has ever really seen her.

BIT-OF-FLUFF (*dressed in a grubby dressing-gown and with a symbolical banana in painted cardboard as a hat; she throws herself at Mitsou*): Mitsou! Mitsou! Hide them for me. Do. They're going to chuck them out and I'll be fined.

MITSOU (*quietly, eyebrows raised*): Who? They?

FLUFF: The two nice boys there, and they're so good-looking (*pointing to the corridor*). Hide them for me, just until Boudou has finished his round. (*Wheedling, and twisting herself grotesquely.*) They won't make any trouble about them being here. You're the star. You can have anyone you like in.

MITSOU (*regally*): It'd hardly be worth while being a star, if you couldn't have guests. But I don't have people in here, and I don't want the company of people whom I haven't met.

FLUFF (*urgently*): Just for a minute only, Mitsou. In your great wardrobe. They're so handsome. (*Without waiting for an answer, she calls in a low voice into the corridor.*) Here, you two, come quickly! At the double!

She brings into the dressing-room two young second-lieu-

tenants, one in khaki and one in sky-blue. The khaki one is good-looking, the blue is better looking.

MITSOU (*looking at them as if they were two chairs*): All this is nothing to do with me.

KHAKI LIEUTENANT: Miss Mitsou, we admired your act enormously in the first part. May I introduce . . .

MITSOU (*apparently not hearing, speaking to Fluff over Khaki Lieutenant's head*): You must understand that if it came into my gentleman friend's head to visit here, before my number Two, with his party that he's got a box for—well, there'd be a very pleasant scene for me in my dressing-room.

BLUE LIEUTENANT (*annoyed at being ignored*): Miss Mitsou, I will not inflict on you any longer a company that . . .

MITSOU (*continuing to speak to Fluff in the same tone*): You must understand too, that so far as I'm concerned I don't care at all whether they're in my wardrobe or where they are. That's not the question. It's just the way things will look. You know I'm not the sort of girl . . .

FLUFF (*overwhelmingly*): I do, darling; I do, I do! But you will do it for me! You are always so sweet. (*To the lieutenants*) Jump to it, you! Into the wardrobe. (*To Mitsou*) The house is full of things; do you know Boudou found one of last year's call-up in the hanging cupboard of that great cow Weiss? He says he's going to tell the management. Old Boudou is a regular stomach-ache. . . .

BOUDOU (*half-opening the door, helpful but suspicious*): You're on in five minutes, Miss Mitsou. (*He looks fixedly at Fluff, who has shut the wardrobe door on the lieutenants.*)

FLUFF (*friendly*): How are you, Boudou? How's the foot?

BOUDOU (*coldly*): So-so. . . . If it isn't better on Thursday I shall wash 'um, and then I shall put on a cotton sock *and* a woollen sock.

FLUFF: Great sufferings call for heroic remedies, Boudou.

He goes out. Fluff opens the wardrobe. The two prisoners, obediently in position flat against the back of it, wouldn't give up

their place for the D.S.O. They are highly entertained and say nothing at all.

FLUFF: Well! He'd have caught you all right but for me. The old snooper. I'm on, I'm on! I can hear the finale of "Poisons of Hell". I must run—stay where you are—I'll be back. *(She kisses them both with fantastic speed and skill. In a low voice, to Blue Lieutenant, pointing at Mitsou)* Don't rely much on her to keep the conversation going. . . . *(She runs out squealing.)* Be good, darlings! You're in refined company now.

This Parthian flattery gets a condescending smile out of Mitsou. Left alone with the two young men, who are still upright and still inside the wardrobe, Mitsou throws off her kimono, which leaves her clothed in tights attached to long strawberry stockings and, above, a tulle vest. Calmly, she tightens and ties at her waist the tape of the tights, opens her thighs to fix the flap properly, inserts herself carefully into the red and black froth of tulle which is her costume ("Jacqueminot Rose"), powders her armpits and the cleavage of her breasts—in short, shows in all her actions a sullen lack of interest, a careless impropriety that prevents any thought of coquetry. As she does this, she thinks it her duty to throw at the lieutenants the remark: "You all right in the cupboard?" It is as dry as a biscuit, and it annoys them.

BLUE *(all eyes, but most formal)*: Perfectly all right, Madame, thank you very much.

MITSOU: Oh, now I've become Madame, have I? Talk of rapid promotion; that's quick enough. *(Silence. She tries to hook together a belt behind her, and cannot.)* Where's that old hag Whatshername got to now, the dresser?

BLUE *(stepping out of the cupboard)*: Can I help you, Madame?

MITSOU: I can't say no. Look, there are four hooks on the upper part of the leather; I can deal with the rest; they're press-studs. *(She offers him her bare back quite coldly.)* Thank you so much.

She says her "Thank you" without turning round to the pic-

silent.) Oh, because of *that*! Really, what a thing to fuss over. I've told you; they belong to Fluff. I can't make up stories, I never could. Seeing me look as silly as this you ought to of known I'm telling the truth.

THE RESPECTABLE MAN: Two officers! Two at once! Mitsou, Mitsou, I never suspected you of that particular vice.

MITSOU (*very sad*): Nor did I. Not that vice, nor any other.

THE RESPECTABLE MAN (*touched*): Yes. . . . That's true, Mitsou. But all the same you must admit that appearances are against . . . And they're good-looking too. . . . Especially the one in blue.

MITSOU (*looking up at the mirror which a few minutes ago was reflecting two young faces*): D'you think so?

THE RESPECTABLE MAN: What's his name?

MITSOU (*surprised*): Well, there you are! It's a fact. I don't know their names, or who they are, or anything.

FLUFF (*in the corridor*): Are you in, Mitsou?

MITSOU (*sternly, opening the door*): You'd better come in, anyway.

FLUFF (*out of breath*): Did you send them away? A bit of luck I ran into them. They were going down into the cellars, and . . .

MITSOU: The first thing you've got to do is to apologise to my friend here. He nearly had heart failure. Think of how he felt; coming here and finding two soldiers in my wardrobe!

FLUFF (*nestling up to the Respectable Man, merely out of habit*): Oh, did you *really*, sir? You mustn't be angry with me, please; I am so sorry; and you mustn't be angry with Mitsou either. They were such nice boys. Did you notice them? Especially the one in blue. And his eyes!

THE RESPECTABLE MAN (*jealous*): His eyes? No, not really. Had he a glass eye, or what?

FLUFF (*shocked*): A glass eye! A glass eye! I never saw an eye so . . . so burning with life. And his mouth, did you look at his mouth? Mitsou, did you look at his mouth? And his nose—his beautiful fine nostrils that quivered when he breathed fast! Oh! . . . All the same, now I think of it,

Khaki isn't too bad either. He has such a lovely complexion, did you notice?

THE RESPECTABLE MAN (*drily*): I'm afraid I did not give it such careful thought as you did.

FLUFF (*vibrant*): Nothing ever escapes me; it's always so. Excuse me mentioning it, though, sir; if you don't go now you'll miss the Dance of Moorish Dustmen.

THE RESPECTABLE MAN: I've already seen it.

FLUFF (*all the lady*): Then you will be staying with us? It will be such a pleasure.

THE RESPECTABLE MAN: I'm afraid not. I must go back to my guests. They are two millers, whom I left in my box.

FLUFF: Two millers! Oh. Do introduce them to me, please; are they good-looking?

THE RESPECTABLE MAN: One is my uncle and one is his brother-in-law; they own a flour-mill.

FLUFF (*as if she had been offered medicine*): Pff! A couple of flour-sifters!

(*The Respectable Man goes out.*)

MITSOU (*superiorly*): I hope you have thought of all the trouble you might have caused me this evening, with your army attachments. It's very lucky my friend is a really intelligent man.

FLUFF (*equally superior*): An intelligent man expects his girl some day or other will be unfaithful to him, as she would be to Tom, Dick and Harry. If he doesn't, he's not an intelligent man. And as for trouble—trouble! Life's nothing but trouble!

She throws herself down on the divan, quivering all over, but carefully avoiding rubbing her knees on it, so as to spare her silk stockings.

MITSOU (*pompous and tiresome*): I don't know what trouble is, in that sense, thank goodness. Not for the last three years anyway, since I've gone with Pierre.

FLUFF (*opening her little eyes wide*): No! Go on! I don't believe you. Not even an argument? Not so much as a reconciliation?

MITSOU: Nothing. He never quarrels with me. And I don't pick on him. It's ever so peaceful.

FLUFF: Well. . . . Can't be a great deal of fun, always, the life you lead. And then, what about the front?

MITSOU: The front? What do you mean, the front?

FLUFF (*scandalized*): The front! *THE* front, Mitsou! Really! There's a war on, haven't you heard? You surely must have someone you're soft on, at the front?

MITSOU: Why, no; I've been going with Pierre since June 1914, you see.

FLUFF (*legs in the air*): What a reason! Oh, well. About those boys, those awfully sweet boys, what part of the front are they in just now?

MITSOU: I don't know.

FLUFF: Didn't you ask them?

MITSOU: No.

FLUFF: Well, what on earth did you talk about?

MITSOU: Oh, I don't know. . . . They asked me if I liked the parts I'd got in the revue.

FLUFF (*jumping up*): About the revue! About the parts you play! What a thing to talk about to lieutenants on leave from the front! Where were you dragged up? Oh God, I haven't got their address! I must have it. I must have *them*.

She shoots into the corridor like a bullet. The old Dresser returns; she comes in noiselessly. Mitsou is daydreaming and doesn't hear her.

OLD WOMAN (*in a faint voice in Mitsou's ears*): They've reached "Flowers in Prison".

MITSOU (*starts forward, holding her breast, and squeaking*): Oh! You! You—you'll make me die of heart failure, anyone can see. Where did you learn these tricks? Behaving like a ghost.

OLD WOMAN (*in a whisper*): I was a hospital nurse before the war.

MITSOU: You've got some deaths on your conscience then. Deaths from a stroke. Give me that lance!

She picks up a wooden lance wreathed in roses, and looks at her own flower-like image in the glass. On a very young face, is

there much difference between a look of passive peace and a look of hopelessness? . . . Fluff bursts in, waving a postcard and jumping with both feet at once.

FLUFF (*squealing*): I've got it, I've got it! Names, addresses, Army unit, everything!

MITSOU: Have they gone, then?

FLUFF: Gone? We can't get rid of them. They say it's much more amusing here than in the audience. I'll do my piece and rush upstairs again.

MITSOU: Where are they?

FLUFF: In Christophette Colombe's hanging-cupboard. What a do, ducky! We're passing them pints of beer through the curtain—and sandwiches—and laughing our heads off.

She runs off quacking with pleasure. Mitsou goes towards the stage, with the chastened and resigned expression of a good little girl.

II

Two days later. *Scene*: the same. Ten o'clock. Mitsou is putting on the costume she wears in the final scene—the Pageant of Victory in red. The costume consists of a wisp of flame-coloured muslin and a sort of belly-band of crimson velvet. There is also a wooden sword, painted silver.

MITSOU (*yawning*): I don't know what's wrong with me tonight. My stomach's all knotted up, and I've a pain in the scallops round my ribs. I must have eaten too many calories, as my gentleman friend says. (*The Old Woman, still with her decoration and wooden shoes, shakes a dissenting head.*) You? Do you know what calories are?

OLD WOMAN: Of course I do.

MITSOU: Well, I don't; when my gentleman friend explains calories to me I always think I'm going to understand, and then just at the same moment it always all collapses—

(*dreamily*) like everything else, for that matter. He never has any luck with me. (*A silence. Mitsou looks at herself in the glass. Then suddenly—*) And anyway I'm sick of all this red! Red always! Jacqueminot Rose first, then the Red Heart of Victory—blast it! How far've they got, down there?

OLD WOMAN (*learned and witty*): *Chi lo sa?*

MITSOU: You can cut that out; it doesn't impress me. Open the door so's we can hear.

OLD WOMAN (*having opened the door*): It's the number "Tropical Fruits". I can hear Miss Bit-of-Fluff's voice.

MITSOU: Yes, you've got good ears. (*Silence. A knock.*) Who's there?

A VOICE: Parcel for Miss Mitsou. (*The Old Woman receives the parcel, hands it to Mitsou. Mitsou turns it over and over, and at last undoes it. Inside are two flasks and a jar for powder, all of fine cut glass. Also a letter.*)

MITSOU (*reading aloud slowly*):

Madame,—This is the lieutenant in blue, by himself, for my khaki friend's leave was up before mine. The evening before last I realized when I left the music-hall that you must have spent all your month's salary on buying the 16 H.P. Renouhard that was waiting for you. The face powder in your dressing-room was bursting out of its box, and the bottle of lavender water still had the Bon Marché label on it. As a way of thanking you for hospitality which was forced on you, I wonder if you would be willing to put both the powder and the scent in this glassware? It's not very expensive but—if I may break the truth to you gently—there's a war on.

Your most obedient servant,

The Lieutenant in Blue.

MITSOU (*having read this with difficulty, looks at the three glass objects, then at the letter, then at the objects, and then starts re-reading the letter in an undertone*): Madame,—This is the lieutenant in blue, by himself—(*In a louder*

voice, to the Old Woman) What does he mean by calling me Madame?

OLD WOMAN: He's being tactful.

MITSOU: It may be tact, but it's not polite. Give me that powder-pot and I'll put my powder in it.

OLD WOMAN: It's not a powder-pot.

MITSOU: Not a powder-pot?

OLD WOMAN: No. It's a jam-pot.

MITSOU (*outraged*): A jam-pot! Why don't you call it a coffee-pot and have done?

OLD WOMAN (*obstinate*): Because it *is* a jam-pot. It's a glass jar to put jam in, a Restoration piece and very pretty too. But I suppose you can put powder in it.

MITSOU: So nice of you to give me permission. (*Bell rings in the corridor. Mitsou gets up in a rush*) I'm on. I'm on. Quick, give me my sword. If it isn't too much trouble while I'm on stage, will you put the powder in the jam-jar and the lavender water in the flasks? Put it in both of them, so's they're filled up to the same level.

She goes out. The Old Woman behaves in a most unnatural manner. That is to say, she does fill the flasks up, and doesn't steal any scent for her own handkerchief or to put in a little bottle for herself. Even though she is by herself, she neither snorts, nor belches, nor picks her nose, nor reads the letter lying on the table, nor even pinches the cotton wool. Obviously, she is one of the remarkable characters thrown up by the war. There is a knock.

OLD WOMAN (*swiftly hiding the letter and envelope in the pocket of her apron*): Come in.

THE RESPECTABLE MAN (*handsome, as ever; and fifty, as ever*): Miss Mitsou on the stage?

OLD WOMAN: Yes, sir. Victory in Red, sir.

THE RESPECTABLE MAN (*stopping in front of the glassware*): What are those?

OLD WOMAN: Two flasks and a powder-jar, sir. I call it a powder-jar, sir, but as a matter of fact—

THE RESPECTABLE MAN (*interrupting*): I mean where do they come from?

OLD WOMAN: Dauvel's, sir. You can see the label.

THE RESPECTABLE MAN (*impatiently*): Who sent them to her?

OLD WOMAN: I don't know, sir. Perhaps Miss Mitsou bought them herself. She's certainly not very well off for things on her dressing-table; look at what——

THE RESPECTABLE MAN: Not well off? The whole place is a disgrace! I've wanted a hundred times to . . . But she always told me that a music-hall dressing-room was . . . And that, anyhow, for a show about the war . . .

OLD WOMAN (*touched*): Oh, she has such a warm heart!

THE RESPECTABLE MAN (*carrying on*): . . . for a show about the war that quite likely wouldn't last more than a fortnight. . . . (*He walks up and down in a state.*) I tell you, I've been very firm. . . . I have a furnishing firm which was going to . . .

Once more his sentence peters out. The Respectable Man starts sentences excellently, and easily, but he hardly ever ends them. A silence. Re-enter Mitsou, who comes out of Red Victory as if it had been a Turkish bath. On the way she has undone her tiny crimson girdle, taken off her crown of gilt laurels, and is dragging her silver sword behind her like a broomstick.

MITSOU (*opening the door and panting*): Oo! There isn't half a crowd out there tonight. (*Seeing her friend.*) Oh, there you are.

THE RESPECTABLE MAN (*kissing her hand*): My little dear! How are you?

MITSOU (*who has seen the letter has vanished*): Hot. As you can see. Have you got a season ticket here? Or are you running after Fluff? (*She sits down and takes off her shoes with a sigh—not a sentimental sigh at all.*) Oh, my feet, my feet! (*She is watching the Respectable Man's face in the glass.*)

THE RESPECTABLE MAN: Mitsou.

MITSOU (*taking off her make-up*): Here I am.

THE RESPECTABLE MAN: I didn't know you had this glassware.

MITSOU: I didn't either.

THE RESPECTABLE MAN: Did you buy them yourself?

MITSOU: Do I have to do my own shopping too?

THE RESPECTABLE MAN: Then in that case . . . From whom or from what . . . what is the meaning . . .

MITSOU (*looking like a dissolving rose under the vaseline*): A gift from an admirer.

THE RESPECTABLE MAN: From a what?

MITSOU: Just from an admirer.

THE RESPECTABLE MAN: Oh. Indeed. Well, this admirer, Mitsou. May one know his name?

MITSOU: You may perhaps. I don't.

Suddenly she realizes that she has spoken the exact truth, and it doesn't sound like it at all. She exchanges a sparkling look with her reflexion in the glass; behind her eyes is a laughing imp, and a new one—the imp of craftiness.

THE RESPECTABLE MAN (*vexed*): Madam is pleased to jest.

MITSOU (*turning round, and in an unexpectedly sharp voice*): "Madam!" What do you mean, "Madam"? Why are you calling me that?

THE RESPECTABLE MAN (*startled*): Why, Mitsou! It's just a way of speaking. . . . One says "Madam is pleased to jest" as one says "Madam is too kind."

MITSOU (*stiffly*): Oh, is it? It so happens that tonight I am not pleased to jest, and I am not too kind.

THE RESPECTABLE MAN: Oh, Mitsou!

MITSOU (*working herself up*): So it's true, then!

THE RESPECTABLE MAN: What's true?

MITSOU (*as before*): It's true that you pick on me. You demand to know who sent me that glass. I reply to you "I don't know", because I *don't* know. I don't make a habit of telling stories: I'm not that sort of girl. You know quite well, if I get flowers on the opening night, or anything at all, I always show you the cards and the messages. Don't I?

THE RESPECTABLE MAN: Yes, yes, Mitsou; you do.

MITSOU: Very well then! So when I tell you I don't know who sent me this—this (*an anxious look at the Old Woman*) this jam-jar, the reason is that I don't know. Is that clear?

THE RESPECTABLE MAN (*who hasn't heard anything like this in three years which passed without a cloud, and without any sunshine either*): Of course it is, Mitsou! My little dear, don't worry! It's the heat. . . . And three matinées a week too. Tomorrow I'll have them send to your dressing-room a flask of a special 1848 brandy. . . .

MITSOU (*nervous, dressing herself*): No, no! Not any more flasks, for goodness' sake. Let's go! (*Looking at her room with hatred.*) It's disgusting in here! The wallpaper is filthy and insanitary. The table makes me sick. Pff!

THE RESPECTABLE MAN: But you never would allow me . . . I'll have the furnishing firm send tomorrow to . . . (*A knock.*)

MITSOU (*very overwrought, and jumping*): Who is that? Who is that?

A VOICE: Madame Mitsou?

MITSOU: Yes. What of it?

A VOICE: A message from madam's chauffeur. He will wait for madam at the corner of the street with madam's car, because the police have refused to allow him to park where he usually waits for madam.

THE RESPECTABLE MAN: Thank you very much, my man. (*He opens the door slightly and hands out a tip. As he turns round again, he is astounded to see tears in Mitsou's eyes.*) My little dear! What is the matter?

MITSOU: Nothing at all . . . (*Stammering*) It's . . . it's . . . it's the heat . . . and then, three matinées all in one week (*suddenly bursting into tears*) . . . and then too what do they mean by it? All these beasts tonight, all calling me madam! (*She goes downstairs crying, the Respectable Man following her in great distress.*)

III

Mitsou's apartment. A ground floor flat with "every convenience"—every convenience that can be bought for 3,000 francs rent in the Trocadero district. Two fairly large rooms looking on the street, two smaller rooms looking on the courtyard. The courtyard, of course, is "a large, very light square adorned with green trees". The bathroom, cupboards, kitchen and usual offices form a sort of indeterminate zone between the courtyard and the street, rather ill-lit, partly by electricity and partly by bluish daylight filtering in between two service lifts. In this indeterminate zone you breathe the inevitable and dismal smell of wine cellars, gas, clean sinks and metal polish.

Mitsou's furniture is extraordinary, but her intentions were impeccable. Ever since she has had enough money she has collected round her, with a sort of humble greediness, all the things she longed for in her poverty-stricken childhood. Everything is there. There is an electric-light Gothic crown in copper hanging over the dining table, whose glass jewels flash colours on to the elegant monogrammed dinner service in white and gold. And damask table linen, my dear! And a double bed decorated with garlands, on to which two carved cherubs drop from the ceiling a cascade of embroidered tulle. And a chaise-longue in three pieces (it would be better in a thousand pieces) all in silk damask. There is even, next to it, a small lady's desk to which you feel you ought to say kindly: "This isn't the right place; you've come to the wrong floor", it is so unexpectedly delicate and full of years and grace, pink like a dried rose.

If the sheets on the bed aren't as fine as they might be, Mitsou has increased the value of their ordinariness by hemstitching and adding fine lace a foot long. You would not expect or wish any other colours than blue and white in the bathroom, or that the modern, "so practical", dressing-table would be anything but

one of those masterpieces of metalwork which combine the beauties of a dentist's chair and an American office desk. As for the parlour—no, I shall not describe the parlour. I have distressed you enough already. But take just a glimpse among the true or fake Dresden figures, the Louis XV bric-à-brac and the ornamented snuff boxes—take just a glimpse of the fat arrogance of that new-art cushion, splodged like a clown's face, and striped like a railway signal, like a jockey's cap, like a make-up towel that's been used all the week. Back away from a combination sofa and bookcase, in embossed bronze, violet plush, painted whitewood and mother of pearl . . . come and find Mitsou in her boudoir (looking on the courtyard) next to her bedroom (the same). The sun shines uselessly into the parlour and dining-room; they are shrines reserved by Mitsou for "company", which means she never sets foot in them.

It is half-past eleven. Mitsou in the morning is doing her housework; she is armed with that pointless weapon which cleans nothing and never dirties its user, a feather duster. She pats the treasures in her boudoir with it. She is wearing pink pyjamas, with tight tulle ruffles at the ankles, wrists and neck, and has a "Chinese" hairdo.

MITSOU (*to the maid*): If I've told you once I've told you twenty times; it's the electric lamps that go farthest from the clock and the candlesticks nearest.

THE MAID (*who looks like all maids who don't get enough sleep*): Oh yes. So it is. I never remember.

MITSOU (*looking at her*): You look as if you've got indigestion today.

THE MAID (*simply*): No, ma'am; it's just that my fiancé's seven-days leave ended this morning.

MITSOU: Oh. Is it still the same fiancé? The sergeant?

THE MAID: Yes, the same one. Only he's a second lieutenant now.

MITSOU (*alert*): Oh, is he? How is he dressed?

THE MAID (*surprised*): Dressed? Why, dressed like a second lieutenant in the Zouaves.

MITSOU (*not interested now*): Oh, of course, a Zouave. Zouaves don't wear blue. (*The telephone rings.*) Will you see who that is?

THE MAID (*returning*): It was monsieur, to tell madam he will not be coming to lunch. The shareholders' meeting is going on too long.

MITSOU (*who doesn't care*): Goody. (*Humming*) Goody-goody, goody-goody-good. . . . You can tell Julienne not to bother with the aubergines. I don't care about them.

Silence. More dusting. Mitsou doesn't know anything at all about real housework. She can arrange flowers in a pot, and after three attempts can get a curtain's folds to fall right. But she doesn't know how to polish brass or copper, or give a looking-glass the sheen of clear water that it should have, or make mahogany shine with dark oil. She will learn these things, when wrinkles, plumpness and avarice first come to her.

MITSOU (*with a sudden cry*): Louise! (*The maid comes back.*)

The result of all that is, I'm going to be quite alone for lunch.

THE MAID: As so often.

MITSOU (*crossly*): Yes, maybe as so often. But today, the way I feel, it'll spoil my appetite.

THE MAID: There is madam's mother who might be willing to come.

MITSOU: On a Saturday? It'd take more than a lunch for mummy to leave her Saturday customers. Saturday she does the Tarot cards for the Duchess of Montmoreau, and tells tea-leaves for an alderman. Not a hope.

THE MAID: Madam has her singing master.

MITSOU (*disgusted*): Yes, and listen to his plate going click-clack all the time he eats. You suggest the horriddest things. (*Brightening*) I know! Telephone Miss Fluff and ask her to come to lunch.

THE MAID: Miss Fluff has got a telephone?

MITSOU: Yes. Wagram 6666.

THE MAID: Wagram 6666? That's the milkman.

MITSOU: The milkman? You're being funny.

THE MAID: I am not a funny person. I just rang that number at eleven o'clock. Julianne had forgotten to get the cheese.

MITSOU (*staggered*): Well . . . ring it all the same. I'll swear I'm right.

THE MAID (*coming back, displeased and superior*): Miss Fluff will come to lunch.

MITSOU: There you are! I told you.

THE MAID: Miss Fluff has a room at the back of the milkman's. He lets her use his telephone. I said she wasn't the sort of person to . . .

MITSOU (*interrupting, on her dignity*): The sort of person to be waited on by a maid whose hair was all over the place and with pillow feathers in it. Go and comb it. I don't want to see ends in my house when I never have a hair out of place myself.

The maid goes out. Mitsou whisks the dust off the glass of a showcase; it is no particular advantage that you can now see the contents more clearly. Then she dresses. It takes only five minutes because she is "all ready underneath" as they say. She has suède shoes, pink voile knickers and you can see her through her chemise as you can see a prize fruit through its muslin. Over it all she pulls a child's old-fashioned dress, or rather an old-fashioned child's dress, a green taffeta which has no cut, no waist, no shoulders, no anything—not even any skirt below the calf.

Mitsou is doing her nails—rather badly; that is to say, wasting a lot of colour and varnish—when Fluff arrives, with as much noise and fuss as a terrier. If she stayed still a moment you would notice that her jersey suit came from the cheapest department store, and her dented military cap had more cardboard than felt in it, and her shoes were almost worn out; but she never gives you time to observe all those details. She has a wide grey rabbit-fur collar which makes her summer suit "so chic" and comes right up to Fluff's eyes, which you can see are blue—or at least the eyelids are.

FLUFF (*falling back a step after the necessary kisses, squeaks*

and "darlings"): What was it made you think of asking me to lunch?

MITSOU (*embarrassed*): Oh, I don't know. The fine weather, the . . . the aubergines. Do you like aubergines?

FLUFF: I can eat them.

MITSOU: I said to myself that you were sure to be the sort of person who liked aubergines. Now take off your fur; there's only the two of us; and your hat.

FLUFF: Your place *is* pretty. I've only been here before for a few moments in the evening; you can't see properly in artificial light. It's luck you don't have any sun in here; sun fades all the curtains, and the colours in pictures too aren't always fast.

MITSOU (*modestly*): Oh, there's nothing remarkable here. But it's all personal. I wouldn't let anyone advise me about choosing my things.

FLUFF: Nobody but you can know your own taste. You must never let any one else influence you when it comes to furnishing. Look at me; I've only got a tiny place, but if I'd listened to what people said to me I'd have thrown my collection away twenty times over.

MITSOU: Your collection of what?

FLUFF: My collection of souvenirs of travel.

MITSOU (*surprised*): Have you travelled a lot, then?

FLUFF: No, never. They're the travel souvenirs of people whom I've known. Before the war, I knew people from all over the place.

MITSOU: That must have been interesting.

FLUFF (*contemptuously*): Pooh! Don't talk to me of foreigners. Since the war started, I see life only in khaki—or in blue.

MITSOU (*quickly*): Well, now, that reminds me; I was just going to——

THE MAID: Lunch is served, madam.

MITSOU: After lunch I've got something to ask you.

She takes Fluff with her. Arm in arm they go, and sit down under the Gothic crown. Lunch: sardines, radishes; tasteless lemon sole; grey coloured beef and sodden potatoes; stuffed au-

bergines. Mitsou doesn't yet know either how to eat herself or how to arrange a dinner. The young ladies drink an excellent Chablis, it is true (a present from the Respectable Man), but they have no idea that it's good.

FLUFF (*looking at a plate*): They can say what they like, there's nothing like white porcelain for being distinguished, you know. Specially with an initial on. Your name—is that an Arab name you took?

MITSOU: No, it's my friend made it up. It's made out of initials. Pierre is managing-director of two companies; one is called *Minoteries Italo-Tarbaïses*, and the other *Scieries Orléanaïses Unifiées*. That makes M.I.T.S.O.U.; Mitsou.

FLUFF (*guffawing*): No!

MITSOU (*laughing too*): Yes!

FLUFF (*twisting herself*): Oh, oh, oh! And to think that I—what was it?—Oh, damn, I don't know, a friend I was introduced to the day before yesterday—anyway, I told him your name was Persian.

MITSOU: Persian?

FLUFF: Yes, you know, like the Russian ballet. Fancy that. (*They laugh.*) Oh, it does you good to laugh!

MITSOU: Yes, it cheers you up.

FLUFF: Why, do you want cheering up?

MITSOU (*reticently*): Not exactly. Just recently I've been feeling a bit off.

FLUFF: It's the time of the year. Me too, the theatre doctor listened to my chest the other day and told me I needed the country—fresh air, better food and a holiday. So I took his prescription out of his hands and signed it: "Wilson, Poincaré, Albert, George, Victor Emmanuel, exectera." Oh, Lord! country air and better food! Here's to the end of the war, and a motor car for me!

MITSOU: The country! I've never been in the country myself, except twice, when Pierre took me in the car. I'm a Parisian and the country makes me ill. The time when Pierre took me to the Loving Couple—don't get excited; it's the name of an hotel—I don't know what came over me. The sun

setting, up there; and then the clouds; and the sky that seemed to go on for ever. It turned me up. I felt a sort of dizziness and stuffiness, a kind of choking, and I cried and cried. "Take me away," I kept saying to Pierre, "take me away; I think I'm going to die." It all went off in Paris. I think the country doesn't agree with me, you know.

FLUFF (*whom the Chablis has made slightly tipsy*): Fresh air has a special effect on me. As soon as I get out in the country I want to go to bed.

MITSOU: Really! Does it make you as ill as that? (*Fluff's indecent laugh enlightens her.*) Oh, Fluff! Don't you ever think of anything but that?

FLUFF: Don't you think of it sometimes?

MITSOU (*tipsy too, but sad*): Well, yes, sometimes, beforehand . . . but never during.

FLUFF (*flinging her hands in the air*): My God! I suppose it'll always be true: making love is a poor man's pleasure.

MITSOU: Oh, I don't know. . . . I'm not rich even now, but I've been poor, and even then . . . (*She shakes her head, utterly disillusioned.*)

FLUFF (*interested*): Do you really mean that? I shouldn't have thought it was possible. Poor darling Mitsou, you're going to . . . (*because of the maid, who brings in the coffee*) you're going to dress shops that dress you much older than you ought to look. Go somewhere else.

MITSOU: I'm not the sort of customer who changes her tradesmen just for a fancy. Besides you know, the thought of moving, and changing—all the bother. I just stay sitting where I am.

FLUFF (*dirtily*): Sitting down—that isn't a practical position. (*They laugh. She smells the coffee and the cassis.*) Good old coffee! I can do without anything, but not coffee. Got any sugar, Mitsou?

MITSOU: Of course.

FLUFF: Enough for me to have two cups?

MITSOU: Of course. A cup of coffee always means two cups.

FLUFF: Not in restaurants, it doesn't.

MITSOU: I've got some cigarettes; would you like one?

FLUFF (*boasting*): And so have I, thanking you. (*She lights one.*) Mine's Army tobacco too. It's those two pretty boys, the other night, who made me a present of them.

MITSOU (*taking the cigarette from Fluff's lips*): Show us, please? Which one gave you them? The khaki or the blue?

FLUFF: I really don't remember now.

MITSOU: You've seen them again? Did you . . . (*She stops.*)

FLUFF (*slack and sozzled, sipping a large glass of cassis*): Did I what? (*Mitsou says nothing.*) Oh, I see. No; have a bit of sense; there wasn't any time. They'd gone. It doesn't matter, though. I'll meet others, quite as good-looking.

MITSOU: Then you didn't . . .

FLUFF: No, I tell you, I didn't. I'd tell you if I did, wouldn't I? (*A pause. Cigarettes, coffee, cassis.*)

MITSOU: You are nice, Fluff. We never seem to see each other.

FLUFF: When you work together, you don't have time to see each other.

MITSOU: How true that is! Think, about my friend: I've seen him every day for three years, and I haven't got anywhere, all the same.

FLUFF (*sententiously*): Yes, but it's bound to be so, in a case like that. A steady gentleman friend is like a guest. What can you talk about? His home, his business—they don't last long. "Good morning, dear, and how are the children? Has the youngest one quite got over his German measles? I don't like your partner's look. And the shareholders' meeting, was that amusing?" But a gigolo, a casual, a boy who takes your fancy, you know more about him in three-quarters of an hour than you do in three years about the other.

MITSOU: You don't say.

FLUFF (*firmly*): I'm telling you. In three-quarters of an hour—even less sometimes—you know how he makes love, you know if he's very cheerful afterwards, if he's short of money, if he's drawn his pay, if he likes your hat, if he knows your friends, if he bets, if he wants to see you again . . . in

short, all the essentials. Even if you never see him again, he's a person, a memory, a man who really exists, you know.

MITSOU (*thoughtfully*): Yes, a memory. . . . And have you got a lot of them, these—these memories?

FLUFF (*pouring out some more cassis*): I should say so. And more to come.

MITSOU (*prudishly*): Oh, Fluff!

FLUFF (*quite tight now*): Oh, Fluff! Oh Fluff what? What's Fluff done? Certainly, more to come. Is it my fault if we're living in times like this?

MITSOU: Times like what?

FLUFF (*more and more exalted*): Times like I don't suppose anybody's ever seen since the world *was* the world! Have you ever seen a time before when the streets were packed with young fellows, all kinds of them, beautiful boys dressed to kill, looking at the girls and the grub and their mouths watering? Did you ever? Of course not. And are we supposed not to touch? To keep off the grass? And people denounce us and say "Women's shamelessness has no limits! The creatures hang round the necks of our sons and our husbands and our brothers and our cousins!" I answer them back. I say to those people, I say "Madam!"

MITSOU (*moved, drinking more cassis*): Who to?

FLUFF (*not hearing*): "Madam! I am not the sort of person to sew shirts for soldiers! I am no good at bandages. Nor for parcels for the prisoners, as I haven't got a bean. I am the sort of girl for you-know-what, and I wouldn't turn round to watch the lightning strike if a nice boy was in front of me. A nice boy, too, who might die tomorrow!"

MITSOU (*distressed*): Oh no, not tomorrow!

FLUFF (*going on*): "And, madam, unless you tie my arms and my legs, I am carrying on. And I shall open them, my arms, any moment I please, if I have a chance to make a boy happy even if it's only for ten minutes, if he's in khaki or if he's in blue!"

MITSOU (*with a squeal*): No, not the one in blue!

FLUFF (*brought down to earth*): What? What are you talking about? Who's in blue?

MITSOU (*distracted*): The one in blue! The one with the jam-pot! and the letter!

FLUFF (*leaves her chair and her cassis and runs to Mitsou*): Tell F-fluff, dearie; tell Fluff what it is.

MITSOU (*in a rush*): I want the address of the blue lieutenant that you put in my wardrobe and he sent me some glass and wrote to me and he didn't put his address on it. (*She drops her head on to her folded arms.*)

FLUFF: Well, now, fancy that!

MITSOU (*raising her head and leaning against Fluff*): Now you understand. I know you've got his address. I didn't dare to ask you for it right away, Fluff; but do give it me, dear Fluff, please; please give me his address, please. (*She begins to cry.*)

FLUFF (*as if Mitsou had just earned a good conduct medal*): Now that is nice! That is good, very good indeed! Oh, excellent. You shall have it, of course you shall. This is splendid.

She rocks her to and fro like a mother. Kisses, whispers, planning. . . .

IV

Mitsou to the Blue Lieutenant

Dear Sir,—I do not know how to thank you for the pretty things you sent me. I know enough about beautiful things to see that they were chosen by someone with excellent taste. If you do me the honour of coming to see me again, you will find many changes in my dressing-room and you will see that your pretty crystalware occupies the place of honour there.

Very sincerely yours,
Mitsou

P.S. If I dared, I would like to ask you the date of your next leave.

Blue Lieutenant to Mitsou

Madame,—You made a fool's bargain with me. To send to you the most modest, ordinary triviality, and to get in answer a letter in which humour, spontaneity and Parisian grace all flower together—too much, it is too much. How my comrades would envy me if I showed them this letter, which they would certainly say was the beginning of an adventure! You see, they do not know that I am far from adventurous, and that you embody in the revue at the Empyrée-Montmartre, the gravity of youth, the determination to behave well—in short, Madame, Propriety with a big P, a motor car and a reliable gentleman friend. Is there anything I have forgotten? I beg your pardon if so, with all the modesty of a man whose surname and Christian name you know, but who still obstinately prefers to remain your anonymous and respectful

Blue Lieutenant

Mitsou to Blue Lieutenant

Dear Sir,—I was very pleased to get your letter. It took only four days to come, which isn't much as things go nowadays—and they don't go very fast. Now and again some days are longer than others, you can't say why. Sometimes too there are compliments that don't please you and even make you sad; I thought that when I read your letter. I got more pleasure out of looking at your lovely handwriting than reading your letter, where there were bits that suggested you thought I was somebody else. If you wrote them in the hope that I wouldn't be able to understand them, it wasn't an awfully smart amusement for a young man like you. And if you thought I would understand them and be offended, then I can tell you I'm not upset, and a woman hasn't the time to be touchy when she has something else to think of. At least I've found out from your letter what French officers mean by propriety—a tulle chemise and strawberry stockings.

I say "no hard feelings" to you and *au revoir*, and don't forget next time that I asked for the date of your next leave.

Mitsou

Blue Lieutenant to Mitsou

Madame,—Few female letter writers could boast as you can of so many essentials in fifteen lines of handwriting: irony, the knowledge of what is correct, mystery. The Mystery of the Music-Hall Star! What a title for a film serial in twenty-three reels! So those eyes, wide open at life passing by, were lying, were they? Thought was going on behind them! As for irony, I have no right to be surprised at it, or I shall look an ill-mannered lout again. It is the natural result of living in the feverish atmosphere of the music-hall, and in the company of those jolly dogs, the Writers of Revues! I knew one once; he was a sparkling bureaucrat long past the age of even a reservist. He filled a counter-foil book every day with notes under the headings *Newsvalue*, *Indecency*, and *Lavatory Jokes*. Alphabetically.

As for my next leave, the Germans will fix the date of it. If they behave themselves, two months; if they attack, maybe never. Isn't it disgusting that my visit to your dressing-room should depend on people like these?

I remain, Madame, most respectfully your

Blue Lieutenant

Mitsou to Blue Lieutenant

You have chosen it, Sir, you are my Blue Lieutenant. See how funny words are. If I say "my lieutenant", it's nothing, but if I write "my blue lieutenant", it becomes nice. Fluff called one of her boy friends "my purple moorhen", but I'm not comparing that. I would rather you called me Miss Mitsou than Madame; I have no reason except that I don't like it.

I didn't find any "essentials" myself in your letter. Perhaps you didn't put any in. Except maybe the place where you were scoring off the poor old boys who write revues. That passage rather flattered me; it made me think I was talking to your respected

father. Middleaged men like to make jokes about theatrical life as if they knew what goes on backstage, with little tee-hees and sniggers.

But when I read it again I saw it must be you. I saw you again just as you were in the wardrobe, and just as young. A young man must be very young not to know that when a women tells him she is thinking of *something else* she really means *someone else*. Goodbye, my Blue Lieutenant. Fluff sends you her best wishes, and I am praying nothing will happen to you.

Mitsou

Blue Lieutenant to Mitsou

Miss Mitsou, I think today I shall possibly write nothing but nonsense to you. One should never write to a girl after two sleepless nights, for one of which I was on guard duty. Miss Mitsou, your simplicity, your apparent simplicity intrigues me more than I like. So you spend your time thinking, do you? It's typical of our age group—class 13 isn't it? Me too; I think. I think about the family I belong to, about my job as a soldier, about the swift and rather brutish pleasures of my leaves and about—my pen-pal, you are going to bet. Then don't bet. I haven't got, and I don't want, a pen-pal. My friends, my comrades and my men, have let themselves go in such an epistolary orgy, such a wastefulness and gobbling of pen-pals that I stand aside, glutted by the hoggishness before I start. But what about you, Thinking Mitsou? Is it the pleasant face of my khaki friend that haunts you? How silly of me! It is, it must be, a civilian. We others, we just pass by, we are running already when we throw behind us a "Cheeri-oh . . . see you some time . . . maybe"; we promise, the civilians keep our promises. They are there—they are all there—what an advantage over us! Perhaps your next letter will promote me to the rank of Confidant. It is correct; it is "the war", that a young Confidant, twenty-four years old and in the trenches, should listen to the romance of a matinée idol old enough to be his father. Miss Mitsou, I am all attention. I am prejudiced in your favour by a phrase that fell from your thoughtless pen, just

at the moment I needed to read it: "I am praying that nothing happens to you."

Your respectful and tired
Blue Lieutenant

Mitsou to Blue Lieutenant

My Blue Lieutenant,—I couldn't help laughing when I read your letter, first of all because I was so pleased from the moment I saw the envelope, and next because you said "a phrase that fell from your thoughtless pen". Goodness! My thoughtless pen! It's obvious to see that writing comes easy to you. How could my pen be thoughtless, when I have to think of everything when I'm writing, spelling, handwriting, and what it is I want to say to you. Oh no, I'm never thoughtless in writing to you. And it's not just now when you're beginning to think not too badly of me that I'd let myself go.

So my letters don't bore you all that? What do you think I'd say of yours, then? What you don't guess is that I've never corresponded with anybody before. I'm a Parisian and I don't move out of Paris. All the people I know are Parisian too, and for Parisians it's much easier to spend twopence on the telephone than write a letter. I would like to impress on you that it's really something in my life for me to start writing letters, and letters to you too. It's difficult for me to understand the difference between the letters I do write and the sort of letters you ought to be getting. But anyway I do write to you truthfully. And however silly Mitsou is, she will have sense enough to know when the time has come that she ought to stop writing to you. Thank goodness, that's the sort of thing one learns without needing lessons in grammar.

I admit I did try to tease you a little in my earlier letters. All right, and why not? The little I saw of you, you did seem so young to me, so solemn, almost a man-Mitsou. Like Mitsou you are afraid people will let you down, like her you take your job seriously and maybe like her you say: "Let's never forget we are twenty-four years old, and that playing the fool is for the elderly!" Because of the picture I've made of you, I have the

idea that I ought to of forgiven you everything but not to of forgotten anything. Anyhow I like to think we are rivals in a way, rivals like friends or twins I mean. It gives me a bit of courage, that is courage enough to ask some questions. Questions like for example:

1. Is night duty really dangerous?

2. Could you do with some useless things? Because one's family always remembers to send you the really useful things, but not the others. I'd like very much to send you things that aren't at all necessary but would amuse you.

The weather is lovely in Paris now. I hope it's lovely with you, and especially I hope it's lovely two months from now, or I ought to say exactly a month and a half. I take advantage of the fine weather and get up at ten o'clock; you'll say that isn't so early; but there's no reason for me to get up earlier; there's no post before ten. I asked. There's another at twelve, and that's very convenient, because the person you met in my dressing-room comes to lunch at one and I like to have my letters before then. Afterwards I can go out shopping, or anything; I can do what I like; there's no post, I mean no post that brings anything, until seven o'clock or half-past.

At half-past six I eat a big high-tea, and as the post is very unreliable just now it sometimes happens I find a letter after I come back home after the performance. This is what happened with your last letter, and I was as excited by it as if I'd found a real living person in my room.

Now here I am writing you a very long and silly letter, but I liked so much writing it that I can't bear to tear it up. Goodnight, Blue Lieutenant, I am thinking of you and hoping that this is not going to be another guard night.

Mitsou

Blue Lieutenant to Mitsou

I got your letter, Mitsou. I am reading it again; I am so astonished that a small young woman who goes around so easily with nothing on could hide so much of herself. I haven't forgotten, Mitsou, and I shan't forget all the details of the beautiful

form that you let me watch, with such arrogant indifference, from the back of your wardrobe. But it wasn't while I was staring at you that I felt like calling out: "What sort of a person are you, Mitsou?" That is what I'm asking you now, though; just as if we'd never met. Mitsou with no grace of style, Mitsou with a schoolgirl's handwriting, you've never once failed to convey to me in your letters just exactly what you wanted to say, nothing more nor less. You didn't answer me, Mitsou, when I asked you with a falsely indifferent air about the person who occupied your private thoughts. No, you didn't answer; you just gave me a very exact timetable of the postal deliveries in Paris.

Cunning Mitsou! You have just shown me how romantic even a railway timetable can be. It's both the most annoying and most charming moment in an affair, when two beings who hardly know each other yet, already have an inescapable compulsion to be together at a given time. . . . Mitsou, I am just going to call you Mitsou and nothing else. One word more, Mitsou, and I shall call you *tu*. No, I won't. The first *tu* should be a sudden cry which you can't resist; and there are no cries in a letter.

Why no, dear Mitsou, a night's guard isn't dangerous. But all the same, it is a trial; you carry two burdens that the long night makes very heavy. They are: responsibility and loneliness. Responsibility is the lighter of them; you know what it is, you know its limits, and you can face up to it. But loneliness fills you with dreams, with fears, with desires that you stamp on and reactions you suppress. In fact, it is unwise even to talk of them.

Do you really want to present me with what Richard Wagner—and he used French, by God—called the *enivrant superflu*? (He hadn't thought of your vivid phrase "Could you do with some useless things?") Yes, then; I could do with these useless things:

(1) A photograph of Mitsou.

(2) A piece of strawberry coloured velvet, the size of both my hands together, to be used to bind a book I am fond of. The exact shade to be that of Rose Jacqueminot.

That will be all for now. But my demands are by no means

finished; tremble! Dear Mitsou, I kiss your long pretty paws respectfully and remain your

Blue Lieutenant

Mitsou to Blue Lieutenant

Dear Blue Lieutenant,—Lots of women when they got your letter would have imagined they were getting a love letter. But not me, thank goodness. In spite of the difficult words that I sometimes find in your letters there's no danger of my not understanding what they really mean. I'm flattered enough by them anyway not to start looking for impossibilities.

The picture of Mitsou and the velvet are going to you in a separate little parcel. The velvet is a good match; and the photograph is of "Rose Jacqueminot" too. But all that red is very depressing in a photograph. I don't want any parts in red any more; they make me dismal. Fluff wanted me to send you a little life-saving purse, like she sends to her boy friends. They're little purses in which she puts nothing but kisses. But I'm only sending you, as I did before, my true prayer that nothing will happen to you. The phrase has come back to me from the days when I had to write New Year messages on beautiful decorated notepaper when I was a little girl. I'm awfully sorry I can't invent a better one for you. My prayer is better than a fine phrase, because a phrase isn't anything real, and *it* is. It is as real as the swallow or the dove was on the fancy paper. I can see it, it flies around, it moves and has a face, it's all round you, on your head and on your breast—I can see it just as well as if I was there too, on your breast I mean. Fluff's purse would certainly be very pretty and lovely embroidered, but it wouldn't cover enough area. With my prayer, I'm less worried; it covers you all over.

You aren't half funny, dear blue lieutenant, asking me "Who are you, Mitsou?" I never expected to see you in the part of the compère in the revue who asks "But who is this beautiful girl?" If I was still in the Christmas revue at the Concert Mayol I would be wearing two wings, a helmet and a lance, and I'd answer "I am the Spirit of Heroic Love!"

But I am not the spirit of heroic love. I promise you I'm noth-

ing out of the ordinary. You saw all of me on the wardrobe night; a small music-hall artist, young, not awfully ugly, popular with the public and without much talent. Now does this modesty surprise you? Oh come on, all we music-hall girls know very well where we are, in spite of the airs we seem to put on. Look at Fluff; she has found a line of her own by never for a moment staying still, "here I am and there I've gone". Now I'm a child type, I've got a nice innocent face, and eyes I open so wide it almost hurts my forehead, because that goes with my long legs and my small mouth and my almost-no-nose, and so the revue writers said "She'll be a smasher in the risky numbers; keep them for her!" See how simple it is. You haven't got a revue's writer's mind, so don't try to see further than you have seen. I undressed in front of you, did I? Well, that shows I saw no harm in it, or I'd've put up the screen. I hardly spoke to you at all? It's only that I was behind the door when tongues were given out, as they say. To show you, I couldn't think of a word to say when you-know-who came into the dressing-room. That's really all. All about Mitsou who was a good little garment worker and got frightened of the two things she knew best, poverty and the workshop. So she took a fancy for the thing she knew least about, the stage. Everybody always thinks it easier to succeed in what they haven't learnt to do than the things they have learnt; it's natural.

As for the rest, my private life, you know it. You know who it depends on, or does until the day comes when I decide it shan't depend on him any more. My friends? It wouldn't take long to make the rounds of them. I'm too young to have men friends, at my age it gets spoilt at once. Women friends aren't easy either. You run into bad lots who have got no decency. They drink and they smoke opium. I know some who became typists or telephonists in a Ministry, but now they treat us others like dirt. Of course I meet others too who are just like me and they're the worst. After being with them an hour I say to myself: "Now, is that what I'm like? Am I like them already at my age, so colourless, so absolutely dull off stage? Better stay at home and stare in my mirror, it'll make me feel less bad." Well, there! It's

quite easy to learn to live alone, at any rate until something important happens. There's only three important things that could happen in the lives of people like us—death, a great success on the stage, or love. Dear blue lieutenant, which is going to fall first on my head, or on my heart? I wish I knew.

No, don't kiss my hands, not even in a letter. They're not nice enough; the liquid white ruins the skin and besides I've put too much varnish on the nails. I'm looking after them, and I'll have them alright when you come. But kiss the crook of my arm; it has a lot of tiny rivers in blue and green and when you kiss it you need only be thinking of the army maps.

Your
Mitsou

P.S. But I too want a photograph!

Blue Lieutenant to Mitsou

Dear Mitsou,—I want to see you. I want to see you. What else is there to say to you? I want to see you. I feel gentle, weak, vague, turning towards something sweet, profound and indistinct that is calling me. I feel happy and yet deprived of everything, all at the same time. Anxiety and laziness too—both of them rather agreeable. An adolescent condition, I suppose. . . . Your photograph reminds me of two things—you; and a phrase of Francis Jammes about a young girl who "looked like a dark little rose, and was singing". . . . Mitsou, will you kiss me? I am asking you that because I would like it. Our long previous acquaintance, of eight whole weeks of truthfulness, compels me not to hide anything from you. Kiss me, Mitsou. When I think that I fastened a belt behind your back, taking care not to nip in the hooks your skin so little covered by the tulle. . . . I remember that the petunia-coloured rouge on your cheeks, and the harsh lights, made your arms and the line down your back seem green, green like the white lilac that hothouses force to bloom in winter. . . . I remember that you quite coldly and chastely held up your slender arms to make it easy for me. . . . Mitsou, I don't like the smell of verbenas. I only like one scent, the petals

of a tea-rose dropped into a sandalwood box which has had very good tobacco in it; Mitsou's scent.

"A lot of changes in your dressing room?" Why? Wait a bit. Let me see it once again as I saw it *at that time*, from the back of the wardrobe. Don't change anything; only turn one piece of furniture out. A piece of furniture that came in while I was there, about fifty-five or fifty-six years old. A very bad period. Then everything will be all right. Dear, dear Mitsou, how I like everything about you, and especially how anxiously your letters describe for me your clean and sad life, as empty as a new attic! Do you know mine is almost as empty? Mitsou, we boys of twenty-four, the war grabbed us just as we came out of college. It made us into men, and I am afraid that we shall never recover from having missed the time of growing up. We lost forever that precious period, in which we might have learnt poise and balance in voice and manner, and the habit of being free, and how to treat our families and how to approach women without being afraid or acting like cannibals—women, I mean, who would not be thinking only of our desires or our money. Mitsou, forgive me for boring you with all this. The reason is that just now my regrets have a special reason: am I going to throw at your feet an overgrown schoolboy or a much-too-young grown man, who will be like a fruit out of season, ripe on one side and green on the other?

Mitsou, listen. In ten days, Mitsou, I—well, in ten days I am going to be in Paris for forty-eight hours, on a special service. The brutality of that statement shocks me. I am blushing over it, as one blushes over the movement of one's hand over a breast or a bottom in a crowd, which one's ashamed of afterwards.

Here's the photograph of me you wanted. It is yellowish and not mounted, and I look very ugly frowning into the sun. The small rise that you see in the distance through the opening in the earth wall is the German lines—only four hundred yards away, damn them. How nice that crimson velvet smells; I had it with me in bed.

Your
Blue Lieutenant

Mitsou to Blue Lieutenant

Dear Blue Lieutenant,—It's over now, the screwing up my courage to write to you; I'm going to see you. I've seen you already, in fact, in that photo you say is horrid, and all the same I feel sure, I feel so sure my head swims, that you chose it because you know how wonderful you look against the sky-line, and it shows your figure and the way you hold your head and stick your chin out. No, don't, don't say it's horrid; it's everything that I like and makes my heart beat faster. You know, I give up, now. Do you know, I've been holding myself back, ever since I wrote you that first stupid letter; I'd have liked to write to you quite simply: "I must see you again, because I've changed altogether and I think I'm in love with you." But how wise I was to hold back! First of all, it probably wasn't true then that I was in love with you. I hadn't really got the disease properly; it was like the beginning of flu. I don't know what state I was in; I complained to Fluff I kept going hot and cold; I asked the dresser for stomach pills and headache pills. You see I just didn't realize. Even your present you gave me, I looked at it as if it'd done something to me; I picked on it and nagged at it: "That blue lieutenant, I suppose he thinks I'm going to run after him because of a powder pot!" I mean, all sorts of stupidities and misinterpretations. I can't write clearly like you. However, as Fluff says "Keep your mouth shut and you won't make mistakes"; I am relying a lot on my silence, for when you come here and are near me. Look at me, in such a hurry to turn myself inside-out-like for you, as if I was a basket of fruit to show that what's underneath is as good as the top. It's because I've been full for the last two months of new thoughts so nice and so worrying that I can't find words good enough to describe them.

Only a little while ago I was sure I wouldn't be able to write to you. And as it is I don't think this letter will be right about all those things that seem to me so important and so urgent. I've only just this moment thought that you've never seen me in ordinary clothes. It's awful. I don't know what to do. You never said if you liked small hats, and I almost never wear anything

else. My skirts aren't very short, anyhow. I hardly ever wear very bright colours in the street; it's not right in wartime and anyway I like to get away from the rainbow colours on the stage. What I wear is navy blue, dark green, and black and white. I don't make my face up when I go out. My hats fit tight and I show my ears, because they're not large.

What else should I say? You've seen almost all the rest, and I wish you hadn't now. I really haven't anything seriously wrong with my body, except my toes a little bit, because of wearing fashionable shoes. And there's a scar, from an accident with a hatpin, on the back of my neck just where the hair begins. I shall never bow my head before you, though, unless I'm ashamed or sorry, so it only depends on us two and you mayn't ever see it.

I don't know what's going to happen to me. I don't know if anything is going to happen to us. . . . Oh yes, I do hope something will. We are very young and liable to everything. But before having really known you and even if you forget me quickly I want to say thank you from my heart. Perhaps quite soon I shall see in my mirror Mitsou laughing for joy. Perhaps it will be a Mitsou in tears. But whichever it is it won't be the same Mitsou as before you came, that stupid sensible Mitsou, who never laughed and never cried, that poor creature who didn't even have her own private sorrows. So I am your debtor for life, dear, dear Blue Lieutenant, because you couldn't help giving something to a girl who had nothing.

Your
Mitsou

V

Mitsou's flat. She is waiting for him. He ought to arrive in Paris at noon, but he has a family. He has promised Mitsou to come to tea, and she is waiting for him. Yesterday she bought an English teatable, some port, three lace aprons for the maid, 125 francs'

worth of perfume, and a hat; and stood around for two hours for the "final fittings" of two frocks. This morning she bought fruit and flowers.

It is five o'clock. The scent is in the hairdressers' bottles and shines, with the colours of brandy and green chartreuse; cherry brandy, port and cognac are on the table and look like the golden toilet water and the liquid carmine that Mitsou uses to touch up her gums and the inside of her lips. The flowers are feeling the heat. The sun is moving slowly; it lights up the bowl of cherries, throws a circle of gold on the table and finally touches Mitsou's shoulder, in the armchair where she has been sitting for some time.

MITSOU (*getting up suddenly*): It's five o'clock! (*The sound of her voice alarms her; she repeats more quietly*) It's five o'clock.

She opens a picture-paper and puts it down again because she sees her hands are trembling. She tries to walk up and down, but there is no up-and-down in this boudoir, and she takes refuge by the window, against the lace curtain, knowing she has found the place that she won't move from, not until she hears the wheels of a vehicle, the sound of a horn and the banging of a taxi door, the ringing of a doorbell.

She is wearing a black satin dress, with emerald green embroidery at the neck and with short sleeves that stop, as Fluff says, where your arms get skinny. Mitsou is not very pretty today. All the same, her pale face with no make-up, her long heavy lashes, her smooth hair (black satin too) and the unfashionable but distinguished length of her swan-neck give her the solemnness and black-and-white charm of a heroine of romance—though no heroine of romance would have so short a nose.

She is thirsty and bites her dry lips. She leans her forehead against the half-open window, enjoys the faint draught and thinks that a thousand tumultuous thoughts are running through her brain. In fact she isn't thinking about anything; she is just waiting. She stares into the street and sometimes looks down at her shoes, which have wooden heels. Now and again a small worry runs through the anxious emptiness of her mind, stings, and

vanishes: "I think a thread has gone in my stocking. . . . I ought to have taken an aspirin. . . . Suppose he isn't free for dinner? . . . Suppose I meet Pierre in the restaurant? . . . And if he wants to come home with me tonight what shall I say? . . . I ought to have taken the black hat and not the black and green. . . . It's half-past five. . . . Perhaps he has been prevented from coming."

Suddenly the taxi has come. Mitsou just has time to hear a voice ordering the taximan to "take three francs". Two doors open, and shut. Now here he is in front of her—and he doesn't recognize her. He has pictured her a hundred times—against a sky ripped by gun fire, against a moonless night, in a chequered dream—as a Mitsou in town clothes or in pyjamas, or in a dressing-gown. But in fact he has only seen her once, rather imperfectly clothed in tulle and red stockings. He is surprised and a little embarrassed; he had expected to arrive and cry "Mitsou!" and throw his arms round some ruffled tulle and almost-bare flesh. However, he finds her pretty and rather touching, a young woman in black, rather pale, holding out her hand to him.

But Mitsou has recognized him, every inch of him. There is no surprise or disappointment for her. She is smiling, simply out of pleasure because her blue lieutenant's hair isn't as black as she thought—much more dark brown, really, with a touch of auburn at the neck. And she says at once just what she ought to:

MITSOU: How handsome you are!

He smiles and kisses the small hand held out to him. He is blushing and hasn't the courage to kiss the pale cheek, downy with a faint dust of powder. Anyway, Mitsou did not expect to be kissed. She sits down, motions him to a chair, and starts conversation.

MITSOU: Did you have a good journey?

BLUE LIEUTENANT: A very good one, thank you. Of course it was very slow. (*A pause.*)

MITSOU: Would you care for a glass of port?

BLUE LIEUTENANT: If you will drink too—yes, please.

MITSOU (*filling two glasses*): Cigarettes are next to you.

BLUE LIEUTENANT: If you will smoke too, yes please.

She lights a cigarette and blows out the smoke with a great puff. He drinks. She drinks. She puts down her glass with a trembling hand and smashes the stem.

MITSOU (*crying out as if the ceiling had fallen down*): Oh!

BLUE LIEUTENANT (*getting up*): At last! I was waiting for that!

(*He seizes Mitsou in his arms and starts kissing her blindly.*)

MITSOU (*as soon as he lets her go*): It's plain glass.

BLUE LIEUTENANT: Now what on earth——

MITSOU (*breathing rather fast*): It means luck. (*She cuddles back into his arms.*) Kiss me again, please. While you're kissing me, at least I'm not frightened of you.

BLUE LIEUTENANT: Of course. I'm only doing it to reassure you.

He continues to reassure her. Her cold hands grow warm and unclench, the thin little body he holds softens and seems almost lifeless. Mitsou shuts her eyes, but the lieutenant looks at her and sees long eyelids edged with black eyelashes, then a forehead from which the hair has fallen back, and beyond it the mantel-piece with bric-à-brac on it.

BLUE LIEUTENANT (*under his breath*): If I have a minute alone, there's a statuette here I'll smash myself.

MITSOU (*out of breath*): Ah! (*very quietly, and very cautiously*): Robert. . . .

He is as pleased as if he had been given a present. She has never called him Robert before.

ROBERT (*quietly*): Yes, Mitsou; it's me.

Whispering makes them more comfortable. They aren't yet used to the tones of each other's voice.

MITSOU: Well, here you are.

ROBERT:

MITSOU: Will you have dinner with me?

ROBERT:

MITSOU: But not here.

ROBERT (*brought back to earth*): But why not here?

MITSOU (*embarrassed*): Well, you see . . . (*He frowns slightly, for no special reason, and she begins to lie at once*) you see the food isn't good enough for you here, we eat just what comes.

ROBERT (*shocked*): Mitsou! Aren't you a gourmet?

MITSOU: Oh, yes, I am, really. But you can't get cakes anywhere.

ROBERT: Cakes aren't the only thing. What are we going to eat tonight? Come and sit on my knees and give your order. Curried lobster? Chicken and mushrooms?

MITSOU (*pouting*): No. What I want is cold salmon with an awful lot of mayonnaise. And then perhaps some sweet-breads. It doesn't matter. What is a nuisance is that we must dine early, because of the revue.

ROBERT: Is it still the same revue?

MITSOU: No, it's a new one since Friday.

ROBERT: Have you got good parts?

MITSOU: I should say so! I do the "Harem Dance", and "Liberty Shining through the World", without tights, and "A Girl of the Sixteenth".

ROBERT: Sixteenth century?

MITSOU: No, the sixteenth ward, the one which is next to the American camp at Auteuil, and you can guess how she earns her living.

ROBERT (*pensively*): Life is getting very odd.

A silence. He forgets to kiss Mitsou and starts looking round him. The clinical dressing-table fascinates him; he would like to ask Mitsou sympathetically: "How did you get that thing planted on you?" for he doesn't like to think she is responsible.

MITSOU: It's striking, isn't it?

ROBERT: What is, Mitsou?

MITSOU: My dressing-table. It was a very young artist who designed it; he just made that one only, and then he died.

ROBERT: Too late.

MITSOU: No, you don't understand. He died rather young, about thirty, I think.

ROBERT: Yes; I really should have said: Not soon enough.

MITSOU (*all innocence*): No, I'm trying to explain to you . . .

ROBERT: Darling, don't explain anything.

MITSOU (*with a rush of joy*): Oh, I do love to have you in my own place. It is *really* my own place! Have you noticed my glass cabinet? And the armchair in silk? Bounce on the

springs, do! And look at the etchings! They're really old. Guaranteed. Have you see them?

ROBERT (*to himself, in a very gentle tone*): Yes. I've seen them.

There's no question. Every one will have to be burnt.

MITSOU: Burnt?

She looks at him, and he stops. She has a way of disarming sarcasm; when she doesn't understand she falls silent and opens her big patient eyes, until the tips of her eyelashes touch her eyebrows.

ROBERT (*touched*): Dear Mitsou!

He holds her close to him and for the minute thinks that she really is dear to him, for he had very nearly wounded her.

MITSOU (*relaxed*): Well . . . what are we going to do?

He was not expecting that question. However, he lets his hands slip down from Mitsou's shoulders along her arms, then down her thighs, pressing her obedient young body so firmly that they don't seem to be just caressing her, but moulding her, creating her.

MITSOU: No, no, no. I mean—that is, I only meant—it's getting late.

ROBERT: Then I shall dine with you, Mitsou, if you will do me that honour.

MITSOU (*seriously, and meaning it*): The honour is for me.

He drops his eyes and blushes a little under his tan, as he does always when Mitsou so easily outdoes his expectations.

ROBERT: I shall take you to your theatre, which is a music-hall. . . .

MITSOU (*anxiously*): Yes?

ROBERT: And afterwards. . . . (*She says nothing.*) And afterwards I shall deliver you at your front door. (*Mitsou's eyes become suddenly bright with tears, and he continues hastily, with a slightly sadistic compassion.*) At your front door, and then I shall say to you very confidentially: "Mitsou, my mother's old butler sleeps very very soundly, and I stand a fair chance of spending the night on the doorstep, unless——"

He stops. Neither of them feels like smiling, and Mitsou does

not lower her eyes. Her expression is so little that of a woman, especially that of a woman in love, it has so much decision, so much fatalism, so little hope in it, that pity and once again a sort of respect strike the young man's virgin heart. He comes up to the level of her simpleness.

ROBERT: Mitsou, will you have me?

MITSOU: Oh, yes, with the greatest of pleasure.

Her awed young voice gives life to the tired cliché, and he notices that the phrase tactfully makes no reference to love.

VI

Restaurant Lavoie. As it is only a quarter-past seven and several tables are still unoccupied, Mitsou and her lieutenant have secured a corner table in the best part of the restaurant (the left side) and even a certain amount of deference from the commissionaire and a waiter. It is still broad daylight and the rather airless room smells of melon and strawberries. Robert is looking delightedly at the heavy golden dust of the evening, which makes the sky behind the Madeleine a delicate green.

A PAGE (*twelve years old, and with the gravity of his years*):

Bread coupons, please.

ROBERT: Never mind, Mitsou; I've got some.

MITSOU: So've I. I get extra as a nightworker.—Don't give him more than two; that's all we need.

ROBERT: But I'm hungry, Mitsou. Here you are, young man.
(*The severe child goes away.*)

MITSOU: Are you all right there? Wouldn't you like my corner seat?

ROBERT: I'm very much all right here, Mitsou.

He looks around, with the slightly false aplomb of a man of the world of twenty-four. He puts on an expression of bad temper, to warn all the other guests not to stare at Mitsou, and also

to indicate that he himself is quite accustomed to her, in fact hardly interested. Having given this warning to two depressed Deputies, two ladies from the American Red Cross and a party of four bronzed and garrulous senior officers, he decides to turn his own eyes on Mitsou and enjoy the sight of her in a restaurant—Mitsou in a black hat with an emerald green coronet on it, Mitsou in a black satin cape falling from her shoulders and showing off her long, white, victim-like neck. Mitsou has suddenly become very pretty again.

ROBERT: Black does suit you, Mitsou.

At the same time he is asking himself a question: "Now, why is Mitsou, who is not made up, whose hair is not permed and is brushed away from her ears, who doesn't gesticulate, and hasn't raised her voice—why doesn't Mitsou look like what we call a lady?" This question is so difficult that he doesn't notice the head waiter who is standing next to him. The man's face is like an overfed Roman emperor's and you can read his thought; it is: "My time is precious. I will waste it without a thought, for the sake of my country. I will suffer in silence."

MITSOU (*flattered at Robert's attention*): Robert!

ROBERT: Oh! Yes, I'm sorry. Mitsou, wouldn't you like some lobster? I haven't had any for four months. *Homard a l'indienne?*

MITSOU: Oh, yes. With a lot of mayonnaise and both claws.

THE HEAD WAITER (*looking beyond the uttermost edge of this world of sorrows*): *Homard a l'indienne* is not served with mayonnaise. It is served with saffron rice and curry.

MITSOU: Oh, I don't mind. Serve me the mayonnaise separately.

ROBERT: Put down mayonnaise. Chicken with mushrooms—oh, good; they've got some. Mitsou, do you like chicken?

MITSOU: Oh, yes, indeed; as long as there's salad with it.

THE HEAD WAITER: The chicken with mushrooms is not served with a salad; there is a cream sauce with——

MITSOU: It doesn't matter. You can serve me a salad separately.

THE HEAD WAITER (*reciting*): Strawberries, raspberries, cherries in ice, bananas, fruit salad.

MITSOU (*gleefully*): Cherries in ice! Cherries in ice!

ROBERT: But they're not nice, Mitsou! They haven't any taste at all.

MITSOU: That's just it; they're fun.

ROBERT: Cherries for Madame and for me (*greedily*) wild strawberries with thick cream. Send me the wine waiter. Mitsou, shall we have burgundy, claret or champagne?

MITSOU: It's all the same to me; I don't care what countries wine comes from.

ROBERT: I think they've got a very attractive claret here; it has a light bouquet of coffee and of violets in the glass.

MITSOU (*horrified*): How dreadful! Fancy a thing like that here!

ROBERT: I'm not suggesting burgundy, which wouldn't go with lobster, and is too full for the chicken——

MITSOU: Does burgundy sparkle?

ROBERT: People sometimes make it do so. But there. I can see we shall end up having champagne.

MITSOU: Oo, yes! A champagne that doesn't taste! (*The wine waiter is present and visible, but he has long lost any interest in the conversation.*)

ROBERT (*shocked*): That doesn't taste! Mitsou, where on earth were you brought up?

MITSOU (*annoyed, because of the wine waiter*): Not in a wine-shop, anyway.

ROBERT (*to the wine waiter*): A bottle of ——, *brut*. Mineral water, Mitsou?

MITSOU: Yes, please! A fizzy one.

They are waiting for the lobster. The empty tables are filling up; the American element is in the majority. Fair officers, with red-apple cheeks, are admiring Mitsou inordinately—that is, they put down their glasses half full and look at her with their mouths dropping, and forget their drink. Robert frowns to hide his proprietary pleasure. Mitsou compares him to them all and thinks, "He's much handsomer". She is not wholly wrong; her lover is a delicate and brown type, with thin hands and little bones which move under a fine skin; his moustache, untrimmed,

hides a short upper lip, that faintly pulls on his nose as he talks. His eyes are "awfully big for a man", Mitsou decides, and are sunk rather deeply and mysteriously in their sockets.

They are very young, solemn, and silent. She is contemplating him; he is watching her. They are not drunk; that will come later. And as a matter of fact here is the champagne, before the lobster. Mitsou draws the fizziness into her mouth, blinking; he drinks his glass right off.

MITSOU (*laughing*): It's better than the Army ration, isn't it?

He admits that important truth with just a nod. "There it is," he thinks, "I've found out what Mitsou needs. She's much prettier when she's sad than when she laughs. I ought to tell her sad sentimental stories, but I couldn't possibly. I wonder why. I used to write to her without troubling." He notices that he is not quite sure he wants to be Mitsou's lover tonight. "What a pig I am," he says to himself, just at the moment when the pig in him is weakening, the cheerful, greedy pig.

MITSOU (*to the waiter, who is serving her*): That's enough, thank you.

ROBERT (*protesting*): But you've only got one small claw.

MITSOU (*elegant*): I may have a second helping. But, you know, I'm not really fond of exotic food.

ROBERT (*laughing despite himself*): Mitsou, I would bet you've never seen the sea.

MITSOU: Yes, I have then. At Deauville. I was awfully bored.

ROBERT: I don't wonder you were.

MITSOU: It's true, isn't it? I'm so glad you said that. I didn't understand a thing about it.

ROBERT: About what?

MITSOU: About Deauville. Of course I was only two days there and I came just in the car. But I don't understand those sort of places where everyone is outside like that. I can understand you'd go to the casino, or to a tea-room, but not everyone always about as if no one had a home. . . .

ROBERT: Why, Mitsou, the fresh air! The sea! The wild waves of Deauville!

MITSOU (*shaking her head*): No, it doesn't say anything to me. I don't really care for ~~the~~ country. (*Looking at him*) But with you, perhaps! A bamboo hut with you, if you like.

ROBERT (*disarmed and encouraged*): Darling Mitsou! We will go to a bamboo hut. But not in a car—I haven't got a car.

MITSOU: I haven't either.

ROBERT: But I thought——

MITSOU: Oh, that's not mine, the one you saw. It belongs to Pierre. He has to have one for his business.

ROBERT (*coldly*): I see.

MITSOU (*mildly, but insistently*): He has to do a lot of business—very fortunately.

ROBERT (*on edge*): Isn't there some other subject that you'd like my congratulations upon?

MITSOU (*candid*): Is congratulations the same thing as condolences?

ROBERT (*who is not going to joke*): No, Mitsou; it is not. And furthermore, don't you see that this person is not one that you should talk to me about? Elementary, my dear.

MITSOU (*who has, after all, drunk three glasses of champagne*): Oh, you are so touchy! Tomorrow morning, even if you haven't liked me during the night, I'll have given you anyway something I've never given anyone before.

ROBERT: . . . ?

MITSOU: No, I don't mean what you mean. I just mean—my love. It's not so difficult to understand; I've never been in love really before and now I am. That's all. So you see that person isn't really worth envying and you really haven't any reason to call him elementary.

He kisses her hand, and keeps in his hand her long, sensitive fingers—they are warm, and return his pressure honestly and eagerly, glad to trust themselves to him. As he does this a weird half-hallucination comes over him; he seems to be reading over and over again the phrase Mitsou has just used, written up on an empty space on the eastern wall of a trench and seen by the light of a torch. "I've never been in love really before and now I am." "I expect she'd have spelled really with a double E.

Well, then I love her double Es." A nervous little summons by the hand he is holding brings him back. "God forgive me, I really believe I was forgetting Mitsou was there in front of me."

(*Aloud*): Wine waiter! Another bottle, please.

MITSOU: Another bottle! But you'll be tight! (*She bursts out laughing for no reason at all. Flapping her arms like wings—*) I'm hot, I'm hot! Let's go!

ROBERT: Go! And leave the chicken, with its mushrooms, all alone? It'd be frightened. And, look, here it comes!

MITSOU: And, look, here it comes! Why, that's a line from one of my parts in the next revue.

ROBERT: Obviously, it'll be a uniquely original show.

The waiter serves. Mitsou eats but little, and Robert eats less than he hoped. Their conversation becomes feebler than ever; it is no more than some exclamations, some hand squeezings and smiles of false understanding; their shouts of laughter hide the emptiness of what they say. The guests at the next table are very envious of this pair of lovers who are enjoying themselves so much. But the fact is that Robert is near to despair, in spite of the champagne and the good food. He has held Mitsou's feet and knees between his boots; she submitted happily to the hard pressure of his cavalryman's knees. All the same, he does not desire her, not yet anyway. Indeed, he has no desire at all, except that he wants to go away, to go away—to see nothing in front of him but an empty street in the twilight, or a deserted avenue with young grass growing in it, or even one of those country roads where the verges have been trampled out of existence by lorries and armoured cars. Mitsou has so small a place in his wishes that he is getting hysterical. He starts hunting for excuses for lust and jealousy in the glances which the drunk but respectful Americans are throwing at Mitsou. He calls up pictures of Mitsou half naked and in her red stockings. He reproaches himself and works himself up; and it won't do. Suddenly he stops trying to be amusing or even nice. He notices, without any particular pleasure, that Mitsou when she is animated shines like a jewel, that the wine has not made her flushed, and that the nostrils in her over-small nose are still pale and transparent. He

has no emotion while listening vaguely to her bringing out some family traditions as rules of life:

"The leaves of a mallow-plant are the things to cure drunkenness, mother always told me. . . . Let a man walk two steps alone and he'll do three silly things was what mother said. . . . Mother always taught me that you can't possibly be insulted by anything your inferiors say."

He is dreaming, hiding himself in a melancholy solitude. If he dared, he would throw down his napkin, put a banknote on the table, light a cigarette—and say "Goodbye!" Suddenly he hears with indescribable relief that Mitsou is asking him the time. He cheats, by five minutes.

MITSOU: Oh, dear! Is it that already? Darling, I've got to go to the Empyrée. Oh, it's beastly. And my head's spinning too.

ROBERT: Waiter! The bill, please. (*To the commissionaire*): My coat, please. (*He gets up too quickly.*)

MITSOU (*angel-faced*): Where are you going? Do you want to go round the corner? It's on the first floor.

ROBERT (*choking*): Round the——? Really, Mitsou!

MITSOU: Why not? Don't you ever want to go there?

ROBERT (*to recover himself*): The Queen of Spain has no legs, madam!

MITSOU: First I heard of it. Fancy the Spaniards not minding being ruled by a cripple. . . . Have I got my gloves? Yes, I've got my gloves. Have I got my bag? No, I haven't.

Robert is certainly rather drunk and is electrified by the attraction that Mitsou is securing; he hums the chorus of a popular song. As they walk through the restaurant Mitsou is struggling against dizziness and assumes a look of elegant disdain, Robert an air of devil-may-care which suits him about as well as a ball dress would.

They come out into the street. The Madeleine is pink in the slow-dying spring twilight. Children of three to five years old are selling evening papers and fading daffodils. Except that the daffodils cost a franc instead of ten centimes it is just like peacetime. Mitsou shivers. Robert stretches and breathes deeply; he has come out into the open.

COMMISSIONAIRE (*to Robert*): Taxi, sir?

MITSOU: And quickly, too.

She hangs on to Robert's arm, while two commissionaires start their usual evening hunt; this consists of shooting down, at either end of the Rue Royale, any flying taxi-birds. They run lightly, hardly earthbound at all; sometimes one leaps on to a taxi on the wing, hangs on for a moment and drops off it to attack a more hopeful prey. At last a vehicle is captured, scrapes up to the kerb and stops.

ROBERT (*to the driver*): The Empyrée-Montmartre.

DRIVER (*sourly*): Is that all?

ROBERT (*with the cold assurance of a gentleman*): You will go where you are told. Get in, Mitsou.

MITSOU (*to the chauffeur, who is starting to speak*): I should jolly well think it was all. Do you think I could stand your face any longer?

Recognizing a colleague from her accent, the driver starts up and says no more. Mitsou leans her head on Robert's shoulder; Robert's arm goes round her slender hips. This is the best minute of all. The fresher air, the speed, the bluish lights of the half-blackened-out gas-lamps, the alcohol running in their veins, for Robert Mitsou's scent, for Mitsou the novelty of a mouth that is kissing her mouth; all these are delicious. This is the first time that Mitsou has tasted, one by one, those smooth lips, that enterprising tongue, and those regular small teeth. There is a small canine tooth which is sharper than the others; the pleasure of its nip is so acute that Mitsou pulls herself away.

MITSOU (*head back and eyes shut*): Oh! I wonder where it was you bit me.

He presses her roughly back against the faded cushions and the quivering taxi-hood. He is glad to feel himself at last quite normally exasperated, hurried, and hardly with a thought for this woman that he wants. He does, though, remember her name and says in a low voice:

Mitsou!

MITSOU (*weakly*): Yes . . . But how can we? . . . We're nearly there. . . . Do let me go, we're nearly there. Let

me go, let me go; you can see I haven't strength to stop you doing anything you want.

He doesn't hear her, and he doesn't stop; but the taxi pulls up in front of the funereal line of purple lamps which is all now that indicates a place of amusement.

MITSOU (*hesitating*): Aren't you coming?

ROBERT: Where?

MITSOU (*pointing to the stage door*): With me. To wait.

ROBERT (*cross and greedy*): No. You come.

MITSOU (*distressed*): But I can't! Think of my contract. Shall I give you the key?

ROBERT: What key?

MITSOU: The key of my flat, of course. You can go back there and get into bed and wait for me.

ROBERT (*shocked*): Certainly not.

MITSOU (*still more upset*): But what will you do?

ROBERT: Walk about. Wait outside here. Go to the pictures.

MITSOU: Why don't you go into the audience and see my act?

ROBERT (*sullenly*): I don't know. I just don't like to watch you from the audience any more.

MITSOU (*annoyed*): Well, it's a pity. I've got such pretty costumes, and a very serious number called "The Ivy on the Battlefield" with a little girdle of ivy leaves and a matching crown.

ROBERT (*with a loud laugh*): Well, that's funny!

MITSOU (*scared*): Robert, what's wrong?

ROBERT: Nothing. I was just thinking of the sort of people who believe that ivy grows on battlefields. Don't be cross, Mitsou dear. In two hours I'll be here with a taxi.

MITSOU (*clumsily*): You needn't. I'll have the car——

ROBERT (*interrupting*): Then give it to the poor, or go home in it all by yourself. I shall be here, and I shall have a taxi.

He lifts his officer's cap, kisses her hand as though she was not holding up her mouth, and watches her as she goes. She runs, pushing her head forward like a shop-girl who is late. She doesn't turn her head, but it is only because she is afraid to see

in the dreary light of the bluish lamps the sombre face of a discontented, ungrateful young man, whose mouth is still shining from a last fierce kiss.

VII

Mitsou's flat. She comes in, in front of Robert. He is blinking in the electric light and walks forward in a rather hostile way, cautiously circling round the furniture. Mitsou turns round to look at him. She threw herself so wildly into the taxi he had waiting, the journey seemed so short (some sloppy kisses, some stiff remarks—"Was there a big audience? Not too tired?" "What on earth did you do for those two hours?" and so on) that she hasn't had time to find out if "he's still quarrelling" as she thinks of it, childishly. No, he isn't quarrelling, but he is watchful. He is watching those strange doors, and the chandelier of the Goths—in short the whole room whose luxury just because it is so commonplace reminds him of the provinces, with their lace and scallops and thick carpets. There is the astounding bed waiting for them. A marital bed, whose sheets are a little coarse, whose pillows have blue bows on them, and whose silk counterpane is quilted. A big bed, for sleeping in and for conceiving children in. "If I go anywhere near that bed," Robert thinks, "I'm finished." For he has just noticed that he is falling asleep on his feet.

MITSOU: We can talk comfortably now, dear; there's no one here. Come and let me show you. This is the bathroom; I'll run a bath right away. (*He hears the taps run, and smiles a comfortable smile. He has already had one bath this morning; he would have as many more as you liked*): This is the boudoir. That way you go out into the passage and that is the doubleyou. Come here and I'll show you how the light turns on in it.

ROBERT (*with male shyness*): Never mind, Mitsou. I'll find it.

MITSOU: That's what people say, and then in the night you want to get up to weewee and you bang into everything and land up in the kitchen. Now just look, the switch is to the left of the door. Does it annoy you to be shown the doubleyou? Gracious, you are a difficult person. You don't ever mind asking for a drink and then you won't talk about what everyone needs when they've had a drink. Now, this is the sitting-room.

Robert follows her and looks vaguely at the South Sea Islands cushions and the fake Dresden china. He is thinking only about the bed. Those huge fat pillows that you slip your arm underneath to find a cool place. The musical elasticity of the mattress. That white, smooth plain, the sheet. To drop down on it, one leg that way, one leg this, and fall asleep. "Asleep?" he thinks with a start. "It wasn't to sleep that I came here."

Mitsou has brought him back into the bedroom. In her black frock, with her eyes chastely lowered and her long, patrician neck, she looks as meek as a bride. Robert is not touched by it, but all the same, in black against a lace background, Mitsou is a charming picture, and he smiles.

ROBERT: What are you thinking of, Mitsou?

MITSOU (*raising her eyes, modestly*): I was thinking I would undress in the boudoir. The bath is full; I'll only take ten minutes, then I'll run another one for you and then——

ROBERT (*greedily, looking at the bed*): And then we'll go to bed!

MITSOU (*flattered*): Darling! (*She throws her arms round his neck, kisses him and runs off.*)

Robert, left alone, stands for a moment by the bed. "Only my cheek," he says to himself. "Just to put my cheek down on the pillow for a moment while I'm waiting. Don't let's be a damned fool. If I once put my face down on that white linen what Mitsou finds when she comes back will be a wallowing beast in boots, snoring away on the bed." He drops into an armchair and tries to think about Mitsou. He falls at once into the rigid sleep of a soldier, sitting up, head erect, face stiff. This petrification covers a series of brief dreams, in which war and boyhood (for him so close together) mingle their memories. Blackening blood

in great pools, flashes of fire, a holiday house in the country, a flat bottomed boat on the river in the sun. He is barefooted, a small boy again, scooping the water for tadpoles with a straw hat, when Mitsou re-appears and wakes him.

MITSOU (*in a peach-coloured wrap, her hair hanging down, very moved, very brave.*) Here I am. I'm ready.

ROBERT (*delighted because she has no pyjamas on*): My darling! That's the phrase for a sacrifice.

He takes her in his arms, and becomes solemn again, because she is naked and because she is trembling.

ROBERT: Mitsou, I apologise for my unsuitable dress. May I go to the bathroom?

MITSOU (*very solemn too*): Yes. I've filled the bath. I think everything's there.

He goes off. He enjoys thoroughly the hot water, splashing with his feet in the bath, rubbing himself with soap and the bath glove, noting the earnest care with which Mitsou has provided a fresh soap tablet, new towels, bath salts, and scented toilet water. Meanwhile she is getting timidly into bed. She is trembling very slightly and watches the pink ribbon quiver on her silk wrap which she has kept on. She listens respectfully to the muffled noises coming from the bathroom. Suddenly she thinks of an evening last week when Fluff came leaping down the staircase of the Empyrée to keep a date, and was calling out quite shamelessly: "Cheers, girls! There's going to be lovemaking! There's going to be lovemaking!" (only she didn't use the word "lovemaking"). Mitsou doesn't feel like dancing or like shouting; she ruminates a minute and then shakes her head: "Yes. But then, for Fluff, it wasn't a love affair." Then she thinks, with a sense of shame, of an earlier time, when she gave herself, with a cold politeness, to the Respectable Man, whose embraces were no use to her. "What a long way that seems! I don't know where I am. I shan't ever know. . . . I am going to seem like an old maid." She sighs.—Robert comes in without knocking. He is wearing a bathrobe.

MITSOU (*sitting up straight on her bottom*): But I put pyjamas out for you! On the chair at the foot of the bath.

ROBERT (*completely revived by the bath*): Do you think I'd wear reach-me-downs?

He drops off the bathrobe and stands there naked, certain of getting his effect. But it is pearls before swine, for Mitsou thinks any man "a fine figure" who hasn't got a paunch. She turns away her eyes, which is a great pity, makes herself as small as she can on her side of the bed, and says:

"You'll be sure to catch cold."

With one jump he is on the bed, opens it, dives in and slips his left arm round Mitsou's waist. He pulls her to him and presses her whole body against his. She lets out a small squeal like an animal which has been crushed and then stays dumbly squashed against him, breathing very fast.

ROBERT (*victoriously*): Aha! Aha!

But it would be hard for him to say if his cry of victory is about his capture of Mitsou, or about the sheet. It is caressing all his body with the sweetness of the indescribable surface of hard linen, which he has so often remembered. Close to his own face there is another young face, with big eyes which are very dark in the half light, a fresh round face, with a disorder of hair around it. He is almost touching her nose, a very small nose, which makes kisses so easy. He is breathing a breath that still has a faint scent of toothpaste and of the toilet water with which she rubbed her cheeks. He uses his bare knees to separate two knees which are still protected by silk, and easily settles his leg between two smooth thighs. He can feel they are beautifully rounded, and the flesh is firm and resilient. He is very comfortably placed so. If he had the courage, he would say to this unknown young woman whom he is embracing so intimately: "Look, my dear, shall we stay just like this? Let's go to sleep, if we want to—or talk, but only a little. Or we can cuddle a little, but quite platonically, without any nonsense. We can do more if we feel like it. It's quite possible that desire will wake both of us up, some time during the night. . . . But unfortunately that delicate armistice isn't allowed. Because we each of us are afraid of failing the other I have got to pull up or open out that silky veil, which feels so very nice as a matter of fact. I have got

to break up our friendly hug. I have got to bustle and you have got to hand yourself over. Sure enough we shall be happy afterwards, like children who break a window to get some fresh air. Afterwards they sometimes think the window had its use. Perhaps it was even better than a draught. Oh, well. Let's go!"

He doesn't only think that last phrase; he says it.

ROBERT: Let's go!

MITSOU (*vaguely worried*): Go where?

ROBERT (*compassionately, for she is really very pretty*): My dear, I am a pest. Let's go away from this stillness, this playing at Paul and Virginie, and to hell with all fig leaves!

MITSOU (*who is quite contented, just now, to have no idea what he is talking about*): Yes, of course.

But she closes her eyelids and her fingers stay as chaste as her eyes.

ROBERT (*in a whisper*): Are you asleep, Mitsou?

MITSOU (*the same*): Fast asleep.

She looks under her eyelashes at this pretty, naked faun who is crouching over her. He laughs, because he has seen the black and white of her mischievous eyes: she answers with a nervous sharp laugh herself. The simple lovely gaiety of animals has come close to them; each is near to a friendly biting, rolling and struggling; but each too remembers the need for making love, that unavoidable embrace. "Let's go!"

He puts into it a hearty good will which his youth soon warms into something more; his lovemaking follows a standard path. Mouth first, yes; certainly the mouth. Now the throat, never forget the throat; it hardly fills his two hands, and is straight enough to deserve the lingering, idolatrous respect he pays it.

MITSOU (*excited, and almost crying*): Oh!

Her exclamation, the drooping curve of her mouth, and the hope that she might really cry, excite the invader more than he intended. He rushes through all the stages which the most elementary rules of lovemaking prescribe. In one leap, Robert has taken everything that his white victim has to offer; she is spread out underneath him with her hair streaming; she has made no resistance. He takes a moment to savour fully, motionless within,

the pleasure of what he has seized. Then the slow rhythm begins, to the tune of an unheard dirge, the dance of two joined bodies which are linked together as if they were healing and closing a wound.

In Mitsou's bedroom, for the first time, there is a magnificent picture thrown upon the lace covered wall at the head of her bed: it is the shadow of the body of a naked rider, broad shouldered and narrow waisted, arched over his mount that you cannot see.

VIII

Three o'clock in the morning. He is asleep. She wakes up, perhaps because he has moved, perhaps because they forgot to turn the light out. She is a little lost as she wakens, but in a moment she remembers; a young man is next to her, a young man who became her lover about midnight, briefly and almost silently, and then fell asleep next to her, as suddenly as people fall dead.

She is tired but clear-eyed. She only remembers a most unusual pleasure, the pleasure of holding close to her a beautiful young body which smelt sweeter as it grew warmer, like cedar wood when you rub it, and which fitted into hers exactly, as closely as petals in a bud; this way it was nice, and that way it was nicer, and each time he changed it was better. It is that she is grateful for, not for the sharp excitement, which she doesn't value very much.

He is sleeping on his side, with one arm under his head. She feels guilty at staring at him. If he was awake, would he allow her to examine so carefully the veins under his white skin, and the fuzz below his flat nipples, which makes a fleur de lis on his breast? There is a white scar on his shoulder. Two vaccination marks on his upper arm. His ribs show their arched shape through his skin; hasn't he got thinner and paler in these last few weeks? Where has he been living and what has it been like? His

fine hands are very dark, at the end of his white arms; trench digging, steel, fire—which is responsible for hardening them and breaking their nails?

Can Mitsou kiss that open hand without waking its serious sleeping owner? No, she can't; he has moved; he is still moving. He is dreaming. The skin of his forehead, his eyebrows, the quivering corners of his mouth, all his features are suddenly filled with a life which has nothing to do with everyday joy or sorrow. Something outside this world is tormenting this prisoner of a dream. Mitsou is horrified as he struggles and groans; his helpless feet attempt to run, and he tries in vain to get up. A sort of sob breaks up the agony in his unhappy face just at the moment that Mitsou has decided to call him back from his dreams and save him. He falls back into the serene sleep that has been momentarily disturbed by war, terror, carnage and death.

While her hand is still raised to wake him Mitsou leans over him and watches the last ripples of his dream vanish on her lover's face. A final twitch, a sudden flash of mother-of-pearl under his eyelids, and he is fast asleep again, freed from his anxious spirit. "You would think he had gone away," Mitsou considers. But she doesn't let the faint but unpleasant thought become too clear, the thought that she is watching her lover leave her on a ship, the ship of sleep.

She doesn't feel sleepy. The bed smells nice. She has never bent over the Respectable Man and watched him sleep. What is he like when he sleeps? She doesn't know. She thinks for a moment of that elegant fifty-year-old in blue pyjamas, her skin creeps, and she puts the picture aside. "It isn't suitable at all." But there's another picture behind it: the Respectable Man sitting in front of her at the lunch table at a quarter to one. "What shall I do?" Three o'clock in the morning; that means she has nine hours still. She turns her head unconsciously towards the window where the night is fading; the instinctive movement of prisoners or caged animals. "What shall I do?" Tell the truth; that was what she first thought of, because she is good, light-hearted, and rather simple even if she is very young. But she is not going to tell this truth without the permission of the man

sleeping next to her there; her secret isn't only hers. There is a name that she is not going to tell to the Respectable Man, not out of vanity, nor unkindness, nor even sheer excess of joy; she will only tell because the right time has come to tell it—if it ever does. Mitsou shakes her head and her black ringlets, "No," she says to herself, "I mustn't say anything to Pierre. Until I'm told otherwise, it's more decent to lie about it. Robert is to decide. . . . If he doesn't decide anything, well——" She looks at him rather frightenedly. He is now in the land of the deepest sleep there is, where no dreams come, and he is as handsome as an embalmed body. "Is that man to be my life?" Mitsou prays. "Oh, if only he was willing. . . ." Immediately she rises to the heights of completely mundane heroism. "If only he was willing, I wouldn't need all these things I've got here. I'd just take one room somewhere. I'm earning seven hundred francs a month—eight hundred in the next revue. I'd sell my big diamond ring. I'd take cinema work like I did two years ago; he could come and fetch me after the theatre, when the war's over." She smiles, a swift ghost of a smile. "No. He wouldn't come. He wouldn't wait in my dressing-room. He wouldn't gossip with Fluff and Alice Weiss while I was on stage. He is too proud. He's difficult. He's not at all ordinary."

The sparrows are beginning to twitter, and Mitsou is tired of thinking. She yawns with cold and hunger; the discomfort of the morning is coming over her. She hasn't the energy to go and get the bananas, under-ripe cherries and dry biscuits four steps away. She tells herself she is utterly miserable and has no hope of ever going to sleep again; as she repeats this she lies back and fits herself against Robert's unmoving back, her knees in the crook of his half-folded legs, and falls fast asleep again.

Five o'clock. The sky that shows in the crack between the curtains is turning from blue to pink. Someone knocks against a piece of furniture in the house, or shuts a door, and Robert suddenly answers it: "Yes?" He sits straight up. He looks quickly round the room, and then at the black head of the small wild animal hidden in the white pillow—Mitsou asleep. He wakes up like the twenty-four-year-old he is—cheerful, rested, aggressive,

prepared to leap up and run to the sun. But Mitsou stays asleep. "Poor child. She has slept peacefully right through the night. And I . . . I didn't disturb her." He starts to take her in his arms, and then changes his mind. He waits to comb his hair with his fingers and to rub his eyes; he drinks a little of the tepid mineral water at the bedside table. He rebukes himself for having slept "like a husband", and leans over to her. Mitsou has vaguely noticed some movement round her, and moves away her arms that were protecting her face. She is pale; the two crescents of her eyelashes reflect the crescents of her eyebrows, as the span of a bridge is repeated by another span in the water of the river. Her mouth is tightly closed, small and sad.

"How pretty she is," he notices. "And what a pity . . ." He is almost thinking aloud, and has startled himself. "What a pity what? Well . . . this is what. A pity that when I saw her I stopped being in love with Mitsou. In a minute or two I am going to prove to her that she is beautiful and I am young and vigorous. And that will have no importance. No importance at all. All the same, I am sorry that it won't. There is a trouble between me and Mitsou, something very inconvenient that is bothering me. It's perfectly all right that she should expect me to be unique, but I chose to want her too to be unusual. And it's so happened that she is. She's not like Germaine at Christmas or Lily in March, and not at all like—Good God, I'm forgetting already—like Cri-cri in September of last year."

He picks over a few quite agreeable memories and each time he comments loyally: "But Mitsou is better. Mitsou is better and all the same no affair has ever left me so discontented. She's more affectionate than skilful in bed? That doesn't really matter. She's silly? No, she isn't. You're not silly if your sensibility is so good, and if your instinct tells you what you can't think out. Her real fault is . . ."

He lifts off a tiny curl which has fallen across Mitsou's cheek, and tries to get his case against her quite clear. "Her real fault is only this: she makes you have to think about her just when you want to say, 'You are only a little anxiety, you aren't big enough to be a real nuisance.'"

A ray of sunlight is reflected from a window across the street and makes a dancing square of light on the back of the window curtains; the young man is seized by a sort of animal impatience, an indistinct irritation, and a very distinct impulse to go away. "I could go away very easily," he thinks, looking at Mitsou, who is still asleep and is growing less pale as the light gets brighter. "There's nothing to stop me. Not her, she will let me go without any arguments or coquetry. She'll give me my freedom all right. But just at the moment I turn her off, there'll be a silent appeal, the camouflage of a very proud beggar: 'I don't want anything; I never asked you for anything, did I?'"

He realizes that whatever he does he looks like falling below Mitsou's level; he shrugs his shoulders and thinks, rather brutally, "Anyway, it's very pleasant."

The sight of Mitsou who hasn't moved brings back his natural kindness. "She is pretty," he repeats. "When she wakes up she'll say something silly. But Cri-cri in September poured out nonsense first thing in the morning, and so did Lily in March; and I forgave them at once. Or perhaps she will knock me out with one of her sentimental platitudes, as vast as the world and as stale. They upset me."

The strange room is getting lighter; he looks round it venomously.

"That statuette in soapy marble, the bowl hanging by chains from the ceiling, the Cupids pouring lace curtains down on to my head: I never expected anything like them. What did I expect to find, then? Well, a woman who wasn't Cri-cri or Lily. Or Mitsou. I'm twisting things. I'm exaggerating her negative virtues. I ought to say quite coarsely: 'She didn't amuse me; she didn't affect me enough to make me cry. The motion of her narrow hips wasn't enough to give me that violent pleasure that sends you wild. Or exhausts you.' Then if that's so, all I have to do is to go away, and add to Lily of some earlier month another entry: 'Mitsou in May.' No, it's not true. Something in this girl is asking for what I can't and needn't give her, because I'm young and a soldier. She seems to be wanting, passionately, for me to help her to be like the woman I shall love some day. She

has a sort of resemblance to her already. What has happened is that a plough has turned up, much too soon, a sod where there was the live seed, or rather the helpless and unformed larva, of the love of my future life. But I am not going to drag my future love out of its eggshell, not yet. It's not my fault that I've been living for three years the sort of life where any action—or any refusal to act—is forced to have an intense meaning, like a religious problem. It's a kind of life when you are forced to believe in the seriousness of everything, even in the seriousness of not being in love. That's the real reason, Mitsou, why I am in your bed trying to evaluate the importance of our joint mistake, instead of going away friendlily and then sending you postcards from the trenches. I don't think it will kill you, will it, to have had the light let in too soon on to your growing life? It won't. You will be a little upset, but you will crawl back into your egg. I don't think it is for me to bring you out of it. That is almost certainly reserved for someone much more mature, more patient, more frivolous and more meticulous than I am. And he mustn't be stopped short as I am by the 'civvy' tone of all your words and thoughts. A lot of people know nothing at all about the life of young soldiers—frightened, inspired, sceptical, resigned, greedy but deprived of everything, weighed down by a sour and premature old age, borne up by childish confidence—and they don't know either how that civvy flavour spoils our occasional reappearances for a moment in our old life in our homes and towns, and with our women.

"Anyway, Mitsou my dear, you have made me think about the woman I'll love some day. I think she will have your sweetness, and a sort of pride like yours that will make her able to bear disappointments. I hope that as a dividend she'll also have a big heart behind similar small breasts, rather low-slung. I like to think, already, that she and I will speak the same language and we shan't be the least surprised when we meet each other."

He listens to his own thoughts, a little saddened at the sort of loneliness that is going to be his life until he finds the final edition of a Mitsou. In the streets a water hose crashes a jet of water on to the pavement. Empty milk churns are making a

noise like Swiss cowbells. The naked young man makes up his mind, with his favourite word: "Let's go!" He leans over Mitsou, who is still asleep. "Goodbye, my darling," he says very softly before he wakes her. Then he does wake her, by pulling her close to him, kissing her, and saying in a loud, cheerful voice:

"Good morning, Mitsou!"

IX

The same day, three o'clock in the afternoon. Mitsou has had lunch with the Respectable Man, and the Respectable Man noticed no change in her. She has learned how to keep a secret, and how to tell suitable lies, and how to keep her mouth shut to avoid lying; she is offering up these wretched concessions to convention as a sacrifice to her favourite love. The Respectable Man has just gone and has left with Mitsou the reassuring promise that he won't come to see her again until the same time tomorrow. Left to herself, Mitsou very nearly gave way for the first time in her life to a violent excitement, violent enough to make her smash a vase deliberately, jump with both feet on the silk seat of the armchair, throw cushions at the ceiling, or just make silly squalling noises. The Respectable Man has gone half an hour earlier than usual, and she has thirty minutes extra to get her face, her hair and her little body ready: Robert is going to call for her at five and they are going to drive in a taxi to the Bois de Boulogne, right to the empty avenues of Auteuil. When Robert left her she was tired, and a little disappointed because he wouldn't wait till the maid came and brought breakfast. But their kiss as he left had been a long one, and more loving than she had hoped for.

"When he said 'You're adorable' as he went," Mitsou said to herself, "I almost thought he was going to say 'I love you.' " The memory is too delicious for her even to smile at it, and so her seriousness is not even shaken when the bell rings, and she says

to herself, with a certainty so absolute that for the minute it is almost a comfort: "That's a letter. He isn't coming."

THE MAID (*coming in*): A letter brought by hand, ma'am.

MITSOU (*in a small voice*): Are they waiting for an answer?

THE MAID: No, ma'am. It was a soldier, a private. He didn't stay.

MITSOU: All right. Thank you.

She doesn't open the letter at once. She has to rest for a minute, because she has felt a sudden, wholly physical faintness, the kind that comes over you after a violent nose-bleeding or a slight heart-attack. "How very odd," she thinks, "it's like my heart turning pale." Then she sits down by the window, opens the letter, and reads it:

"Mitsou, my dear,—The captain with whom I came on this special service has to go back tonight."

Mitsou stops and draws a long breath after that sentence. She says to herself: "I understand. It isn't as though he was cross with me, or had something at the back of his mind." She even smiles, so as to prove to herself that everything is all right, and, damn it all, "there's a war on".

"Mitsou, my dear,—The captain with whom I came on this special service has to go back tonight. Needless to say, dear Mitsou, I have to go too. His legs are covered in serge and leather; it is like an over-filled valise—not the sort of thighs I hoped to have next to mine tonight. I am rather afraid, my warm and smooth darling, to tell you just how much and in what way I am missing you. (Look, I have thoughtlessly gone back to calling you *vous* as we did in our letters, even though this morning we called each other *tu* with all our heart, and all our body too.) I should tell it you badly, and I don't really want to tell you. Remember it was only a little while ago you called me your 'twin', as if I was a classmate and a rival. Your infatuated rival then, darling, is not going to tell you what he misses most in leaving you, or what he misses least. It would swell your head, and also prick your little-girl vanity.

"The best thing for you to do when you've read this letter, Mitsou, is to sit down at that old pink desk which I saw in your boudoir and write me a letter. That way, I shan't have to wait too

long for your first letter at the front. Tell me quite brutally if you are sulking over our lost afternoon, our dinner that has been postponed and our night together that we shall have some other time. Tell me too which you'd have chosen, if you'd been forced to have one or the other—the long drive with me or the short night, which would start so late and end so soon? I hadn't an opportunity, this time, to ask you the questions that can't be ignored or evaded, when two mouths are close together, and the whole of one body is cross-examining another. I've not ravished a single one of your secrets. I'm still under the pleasant slack influence of my old habit of waiting a long time—it was always four days—for one of your veils to fall and one of your phrases to come through. Our conversation was made so slow by the past that I began to associate you with an idea of languidness and indifference. I lost that delusion last night, in your arms. There could be no mistake; you had your own rhythm and it drove me on, saying 'quicker, quicker still'.

"I don't know when I'll come back. I don't know if I'll come back at all. Don't be upset, my dear; I only mean by that that the roads are dreadful and a car accident may break my leg, and that bad drinking water has given several men in my regiment dysentery. The other thing, what you call 'danger', we just don't talk about, that's all. The chief point is: You've got to write to me, Mitsou. Perhaps it is cynical of me, but I must admit to you I want to compare two Mitsous that I know and have pressed against my breast: Mitsou on paper and Mitsou on a bed. Here is another admission, equally unwise: Supposing you get tired of me before you see me again, and supposing you go out a few weeks from now with another lieutenant, dressed in blue and in love with Mitsou, as all French lieutenants ought to be and would like to be, I think I deserve a letter about it. A last letter from Mitsou full of her dangerous simplicity, her unanswerable sincerity, and her arguments which are always based only on the facts.

"I'm joking, Mitsou. It's a stupidly correct thing to do at the end of a letter, when you'd really rather complain and curse. I kiss your hands only, my dear; I am putting out of my mind for

the minute, like a good boy, the memory of all the rest of your body that was so kind to me.

"Your
"Blue Lieutenant"

Mitsou to the Blue Lieutenant

I am sitting at my little desk. But I didn't sit down at it at once, and I haven't started writing my letter to you without thinking about it, as you told me to. First of all it isn't my nature to, and I couldn't anyway. And next, a person has to have time to read a letter, to read it properly, and laugh and blow her nose, and wipe her eyes and think about it. I told you already. I can't write quickly. And anyway you didn't yourself write your own letter quickly. You took an awful long time about it for an officer who's been called back to duty. Darling, that isn't a reproach; don't bring your eyebrows together over your nose. It isn't a reproach and all the same it is. I'm wondering if I wouldn't rather you'd written: "Am compelled to go back with the captain. Love and kisses." Like a telegram, you know. Please don't be cross; let me tell you first what isn't all right and the nicer things will come later. Well, there it is, you're going and it's horrid and it's even worse than that. Now why make excuses for yourself over it. I've got the idea that the excuses aren't so much because you're going but because you're leaving me. Now you'll be saying, "There's Mitsou again; how can I go without also leaving her?" Well, of course. It's difficult to explain, but it's not difficult to understand. . . . Darling, only get one thing into your head—I love you. Oh, I don't think I'm giving you a nice present in saying that, quite the contrary. You poor boy, I love you; that's more like. And if you choose you can say when you read it, "That's very nice for me, I don't think." A woman who loves you, even a stupid woman like I, becomes an awful nuisance, she knows things and she guesses things. She's like the electric light when you turn it on; one minute there's only a switch and a stupid glass bulb, and the next there's a sort of line of fire that lights everything up.

The nice part for you of this boring thing that is happening

to you is this, that now I know you can count on me. Count on me for anything. To wait if you want me to wait, and to guess it if there's something you're ashamed to tell me. Count on me too if the idea comes to you to say to my face "it's all over between us"; I'll show I know how to behave and you won't need any soft soap or the other thing.

And another thing, if you think I ought to change my job, or get myself more educated, or alter in some way or other, I can do that too, even if it's only to amuse you or to have something to talk to me of.

Does that make you feel a bit more comfortable about me loving you? Oh, I do hope it does. I'm more or less comforted on my side, because there's nothing I don't see, and your letter doesn't hide anything, least of all. Dear blue lieutenant, it isn't at all difficult to see that though you don't know it what you are really trying to do is to jump backwards to before our meeting yesterday. Nobody could say nicer things than you do about the letters we wrote each other before. A person who wasn't well brought up would just have said to me: "I was crazy about you until I met you. So let's wipe out the last twenty-four hours and start again." But the only use of being well brought up is that you can serve out nicely on a plate what other people throw in people's faces.

"There you are," you'll be saying, "there's that Mitsou being cross." Not cross or miserable, dear, and I do really believe I'm more comfortable in my mind than I was this morning. Think, I was asking myself then when I was all by myself "There's nobody who'll tell me what he really thinks of me" and of course I didn't expect to get that information from you. In your world nobody says "You're a thoroughly nasty woman, Miss." You say: "Madame, I am charmed to be with you. I must just slip out to get some cigarettes; I won't be a minute," and you leave her there for the rest of her life. I am not a thoroughly nasty woman, but I was afraid I mightn't ever see you again, not even in a letter.

As it is, after the first shock, I can see that there isn't much harm done. "Well," I say to myself, "he is writing to me. He

remembers who I am, he asks me questions, he wants to know about me." You shall know everything, dear. Ask anything you want to. Which would I have preferred—the daytime drive or the night we were to have together? I haven't any doubt: I'd have chosen the night. My dear, a night together is less embarrassing, it's even less intimate. I shall always feel more or less good enough for you, provided I've got no clothes on and am lying in bed in your arms. The awful thing is that some time one's got to get up, and then I'm frightened of you. All that you looked for in me while we were together and didn't get—I got all that from you. I'm still being surprised at your skin being so nice, and the solemn expression that you have when you're asleep, and the way you sleep without night clothes. I didn't think your feet would be so small. And I thought too that as you were so refined a young man and ate so elegantly in the restaurant and had all sorts of special ways, I thought that you would go in for a lot of elaboration in making love. But not at all. All you were interested in was in taking me at once, smoothly and thoroughly, and I was delighted. So how can you expect I shouldn't be in love with you?

The difficult thing for you, dear, would be to stop me loving you. What's almost impossible for me, is to get you to love me. I'm saying "almost", because I'm the sort of person who won't believe in the worst sort of disasters, or of good luck. "Mitsou's much too sensible for her age," the girls used to say. If I hadn't been, I wouldn't of thought things out so carefully while you were asleep, last night. While you were sleeping, darling, I gave up all hope of the very best you might have given me. But I was being like a fire brigade, when it tries to save just a little part of a building. You see I am being quite humble, but I'm not begging for anything; please don't think that. If you answer me by saying "Goodbye, Mitsou," it won't kill me. I have a tough little heart, and it can flourish on disappointment. I am rather like Gitanette, you know; they try to comfort her all the time because of a great sorrow and she answers: "What good would it do me not to have a disappointment to brood over? What'd I do with myself?"

Meanwhile even if I am pigheaded I am going on hoping that you won't leave behind just a disappointment. When you found me I was behind the footlights singing a song which had only three verses, and I didn't have even three ideas in my head. Whatever you liked in me, it was you who planted it there; anyway, whoever did, it struck root all right. Weren't you surprised how I'd grown after only two months? The trouble was that as soon as I actually saw you all my petals curled up. Still, all the same, a woman who's in love does grow fast. She blooms; she finds out how to put on an elegance and a colour that will fool even the smartest people. My dear, I will try to fool you. This is a tremendous ambition, and anyway you never asked me to go for a walk with you that would go on all our lives, dear Blue Lieutenant. But let's begin with the easiest bit first. Please make me a present by sleeping with me again; let me have the surprise of following you so easily to the moment of delight. Let me have the trust and friendliness of your body; perhaps one night, groping and hardly noticed, those two things may bring me myself to you.

Mitsou

CHERI

Translated by Roger Senhouse

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"Give it me, Léa, give me your pearl necklace! Do you hear me, Léa? Give me your pearls!"

No answer came from the huge brass-bedecked wrought-iron bedstead that glimmered in the shadows like a coat of mail.

"Why won't you let me have your necklace? It looks every bit as well on me as on you—even better!"

At the snap of the clasp, ripples spread over the lace frilled sheets, and from their midst rose two magnificent thin-wristed arms, lifting on high two lovely lazy hands.

"Leave it alone, Chéri! You've been playing long enough with that necklace."

"It amuses me. . . . Are you frightened I'll steal it?"

He was capering about in front of the sun-drenched rosy pink curtains—a graceful demon, black against a glowing furnace; but when he pranced back towards the bed, he turned white again from top to toe, in his white silk pyjamas and white Moorish slippers.

"I'm not frightened," the soft, deep voice answered from the bed. "But you'll wear out the thread. Those pearls are heavy."

"They certainly are," Chéri said with due respect. "Whoever gave you this lot never meant to make light of you!"

He was standing in front of a pier-glass framed in the space between two windows, gazing at the reflection of a very youthful, very good-looking young man, neither too short nor too tall, hair with the blue sheen of a blackbird's plumage. He unbuttoned his pyjamas, displaying a hard, darkish chest, curved like a shield; and the whites of his dark eyes, his teeth, and the pearls of the necklace gleamed on the over-all rosy glow of the room.

"Take off that necklace!" The female voice was insistent. "Do you hear what I say?"

The young man, motionless in front of his image, laughed softly to himself: "Yes, yes, I heard you. I know so well you're terrified I'll make off with it!"

"No, I'm not. But if I did offer it to you, you're quite capable of taking it."

He ran to the bed and bounded into it. "You bet I am! I rise above the conventions. Personally, I think it's idiotic for a man to allow a woman to give him a single pearl for a tie-pin, or two for a pair of studs, and then to consider himself beyond the pale if she gives him fifty. . . ."

"Forty-nine."

"Forty-nine—as if I hadn't counted! I dare you to say they don't look well on me! Or that I'm ugly!"

Léa sat up in bed. "No, I won't say that. For one thing, because you'd never believe me. But can't you learn to laugh without crinkling up your nose like that? I suppose you won't be happy till you've wrinkles all up the side of your nose!"

He stopped laughing at once, let the skin on his forehead relax, and drew in the fold under his chin like a coquettish old woman. They looked at each other in open hostility—she, leaning on her elbow in a flurry of frills and lace; he, sitting side-saddle on the edge of the bed. He was thinking 'Who's she to talk of any wrinkles I may have one day?' and she 'Why is he so ugly when he laughs?—he who's the very picture of beauty!' She thought for a moment, then finished aloud: "It's because you look so ill-natured when you're joking. You never laugh except unkindly—at people, and that makes you ugly. You're often ugly."

"That's not true!" Chéri exclaimed, crossly.

Anger knitted his eyebrows close above his nose, magnified his eyes, glittering with insolence behind a palisade of lashes, and parted the chaste bow of his disdainful mouth. Léa smiled to see him as she loved him best: rebellious only to become submissive, enchained lightly but powerless to free himself. She put a hand on his young head, which impatiently shook off the yoke.

Like someone quieting an animal, she murmured, "There, there! What is it? What is it, then?"

He fell upon her big beautiful shoulder, nuzzling and butting his way into his favourite resting-place with eyes already shut, seeking his customary long morning sleep in the protection of her arms. But Léa pushed him away. "None of that now, Chéri! You're having luncheon with our national Harpy, and it's already twenty to twelve!"

"Not really? I'm lunching at the old girl's? You too?"

Lazily Léa settled deeper into the bed.

"Not me, I'm off duty. I'll go for coffee at half-past two, or tea at six, or for a cigarette at a quarter to eight. Don't worry; she'll always see enough of me. And besides, I've not been asked."

Chéri's sulky face lit up with malice.

"I know, I know why! We're going to have high society. We're going to have the fair Marie-Laure, and that poisonous child of hers."

Léa brought her big blue wandering eyes to rest.

"Oh, really! The little girl's charming. Less so than her mother, but charming. Now take off that necklace, once and for all."

"Pity," Chéri sighed, as he undid the clasp. "It would look so well in the trousseau."

Léa raised herself on her elbow: "What trousseau?"

"Mine," Chéri said with ludicrous self-importance. "My trousseau, full of *my* jewels, for *my* marriage!"

He bounded in the air, executed a perfect *entrechat-six*, returned to earth, butted his way through the door-curtains, and disappeared, shouting: "My bath, Rose! And quick about it! I'm lunching at the old girl's!"

'That's that,' Léa thought. 'We'll have a lake in the bathroom and eight towels floating in it, and razor scrapings in the basin. If only I had two bathrooms!'

But, as on former occasions, she soon saw that this would mean getting rid of a wardrobe and lopping off a corner of her dressing-room, and so concluded, as on former occasions: 'I shall simply have to put up with it till Chéri gets married.'

She lay down again on her back and noticed that Chéri, undressing the night before, had thrown his socks on the mantel-piece, his pants on the writing-table, his tie round the neck of her portrait bust. She could not help smiling at this hasty masculine disorder, and half closed her large tranquil eyes. Their blue was as beautiful as ever, and so were the thick chestnut lashes.

At the age of forty-nine, Léonie Vallon, called Léa de Lonval, was nearing the end of a successful career as a richly kept courtesan. She was a good creature, and life had spared her the more flattering catastrophes and exalted sufferings. She made a secret of the date of her birth; but willingly admitted—with a look of voluptuous condescension for Chéri's special benefit—that she was approaching the age when she could indulge in a few creature comforts. She liked order, fine linen, wines in their prime, and carefully planned meals at home. From an idolised young blonde she had become a rich middle-aged *demi-mondaine* without ever attracting any outrageous publicity. Not that she went in for any pretences. Her friends remembered a Four-in-Hand Meet at Auteuil, about 1895, when the sub-editor of *Gil Blas* had addressed her as "dear artist" and she had answered: "Artist! Oh come, my good friend, my lovers must have been telling tales. . . ."

Her contemporaries were jealous of her imperturbable good health, and the younger women, whose figures were padded out in front and behind after the fashion of 1912, scoffed at her opulent bust. Young and old alike envied her the possession of Chéri.

"Though, good heavens!" Léa used to say, "there's no reason why they should. They're welcome to him! I don't keep him on a lead. He goes out by himself."

But in this she was not altogether speaking the truth, for she was proud of a liaison—sometimes, in her weakness for the truth, referring to it as "an adoption"—that had lasted six years.

'Trousseau,' Léa said over again. 'Marriage for Chéri! It's not possible, it's not . . . human . . . you can't give an innocent girl to Chéri! Why, it would be throwing a doe to the hounds! People don't know what Chéri is!'

As if telling the beads of a rosary, she ran her fingers over the necklace which Chéri had tossed on the bed. She put it away at night now because, with his passion for fine pearls and his fondness for playing with them in the morning, he would have noticed too often that her throat had thickened and was not nearly so white, with the muscles under its skin growing slack. She fastened the pearls round her neck without getting up, and took a hand-mirror from the bedside-table.

'I look like a gardener's wife,' was her unflattering comment, 'a market-gardener's wife. A market-gardener's wife in Normandy, off to the potato-fields wearing a pearl necklace. I might as well stick an ostrich feather in my nose—and that's being polite!'

She shrugged her shoulders, severely critical of everything she no longer loved in herself: the vivid complexion, healthy, a little too ruddy—an open-air complexion, well suited to emphasise the pure intensity of her eyes, with their varying shades of blue. Her proud nose still won her approval. "Marie-Antoinette's nose!" Chéri's mother was in the habit of saying, without ever forgetting to add: "and in another two years, our Léa will have a chin like Louis Seize'." Her mouth, with its even row of teeth, seldom opened in a peal of laughter; but she smiled often, a smile that set off to perfection the lazy flutter of her large eyes—a smile a hundred times lauded, sung, and photographed—a deep, confiding smile one never tired of watching.

As for her body—"Everyone knows," Léa would say, "that a well-made body lasts a long time." She could still afford to show her body, pink and white, endowed with the long legs and straight back of a naiad on an Italian fountain; the dimpled hips, the high-slung breasts, "would last," Léa used to say, "till well after Chéri's wedding."

She got out of bed, and, slipping into a wrap, went to draw back the long curtains. The noonday sun poured into the gay, rosy, over-decorated room. Its luxury dated: double lace curtains, rose-bud watered silk on the walls, gilded woodwork, and antique furniture upholstered in modern silks. Léa refused to

give up either this cosy room or its bed, a massive and indestructible masterpiece of wrought iron and brass, grim to the eye and cruel to the shins.

"Come, come!" Chéri's mother protested, "it's not as bad as all that. Personally, I like this room. It belongs to a period. It has a style of its own. It suggests La Païva."

The remembrance of this dig made Léa smile as she pinned up her hair. She hurriedly powdered her face on hearing two doors slam, and the thud of a male foot colliding with some delicate piece of furniture. Chéri came back into the room in shirt and trousers, his ears white with talcum powder. He was in an aggressive mood.

"Where's my tie-pin? What a wretched hole this is! Have they taken to pinching the jewellery?"

"Marcel must have stuck it in his tie to go to the market," Léa gravely replied.

Chéri, who had little or no sense of humour, was brought up short by the little quip like an ant by a lump of coal. He stopped his angry pacing up and down, and found nothing better to say than: "Charming! and what about my boots?"

"Your what?"

"The calf, of course!"

Léa smiled up at him from her dressing-table, too affectionately. "You said it, not I," she murmured in caressing tones.

"The day when a woman loves me for my brains," he retorted, "I shall be done for. Meanwhile I must have my pin and my boots."

"What for? You don't wear a tie-pin with a lounge suit, and you've got one pair on already."

Chéri stamped his foot. "I've had enough of this! There's nobody here to look after me, and I'm sick of it all."

Léa put down her comb. "Very well, say goodbye to it all for good!"

He shrugged his shoulders, like a young tough. "You wouldn't like it if I did!"

"Be off with you! I hate guests who complain of the cooking and leave bits and pieces all over the place and cream-cheese

sticking to the mirrors. Go back to your sainted mother, my child, and stay there."

Unable to meet Léa's gaze, he lowered his eyes, and broke out into schoolboy protests. "Soon I shan't be allowed to open my mouth! Anyhow, you'll let me have your motor to go to Neuilly?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because I'm going out in it myself at two, and because the chauffeur is having his dinner."

"Where are you going at two?"

"To say my prayers. But if you need three francs for a taxi . . . Idiot," she added tenderly. "At two I'll probably come to your lady mother's for coffee. Does that satisfy you?"

He tossed his head like a young buck. "You bite my head off, you won't give me anything I ask for; they hide my things away, they . . ."

"Will you never learn to dress yourself?"

She took the tie from Chéri's hands and tied it for him.

"There! And that frightful purple tie. . . . However, it's just the thing for the fair Marie-Laure and family. . . . And you wanted to wear a pearl on top of all that! You little dago. . . . Why not earrings into the bargain?"

His defences were down. Blissful, languid, irresolute, supine, he surrendered again to a lazy happiness and closed his eyes. . . .

"Nounoune darling . . ." he murmured.

She brushed the hair off his ears, combed a straighter parting in the bluish locks of his black hair, dabbed a little scent on his temples, and gave him a quick kiss, unable to resist the tempting mouth so close to her own.

Chéri opened his eyes, and his lips, then stretched out his hands.

She moved away. "No. It's a quarter to one! Be off now, and don't let me see you again!"

"Never?"

"Never," she laughed back at him with uncontrollable tenderness.

Left to herself, she smiled proudly, and a sharp little sigh of defeated desire escaped her as she listened to Chéri's footsteps crossing the courtyard. She saw him open and close the gates, drift away on his winged feet, only to encounter the adoring glances of three shop-girls walking along arm in arm.

"Lawks! He's too good to be true! Let's touch him to see if he's real!"

But Chéri took it all for granted and did not even turn round.

"My bath, Rose! Tell the manicurist she can go, it's far too late now. My blue coat and skirt—the new one—the blue hat with the white under brim, and the little shoes with the straps . . . No, wait . . ."

Léa, with one leg across the other, rubbed her ankle and shook her head.

"No, the blue kid laced boots. My legs are a little swollen to-day. It's the heat."

Her elderly maid, butterfly-capped, raised understanding eyes to Léa. "It's . . . it's the heat," she repeated obediently, shrugging her shoulders as much as to say: "We know . . . Nothing lasts for ever. . . ."

With Chéri out of the house, Léa became herself again, very much alive, cheerful, and on the spot. Within an hour, she had been given her bath, followed by a spirit-rub scented with sandalwood, and was ready dressed, hatted, and shod. While the curling-tongs were heating, she found time to run through the butler's book and send for Emile, the footman, and call his attention to the blue haze on one of the looking-glasses. She ran an experienced eye—rarely taken in—over everything in the room, and lunched in solitary bliss, with a smile for the dry Vouvray and for the June strawberries, served, with their stalks, on a plate of Rubelles enamel as green as a tree-frog after rain. Someone in the past who appreciated good food must have chosen the huge Louis Seize looking-glasses and the English furniture of the same period, for this rectangular dining-room: light, airy sideboards, high pedestalled dumb-waiters, spindly yet strong Sheraton chairs, in a dark wood with delicate swags. The looking-

glasses and the massive silver caught the full light of day, with a touch of green reflected from the trees in the Avenue Bugeaud. Léa, as she ate, examined a fork for any suspicion of pink cleaning-powder left in the chasing, and half-closed one eye the better to judge the quality of the polish on the dark wood. Standing behind her, the butler watched this performance nervously.

"Marcel!" Léa said, "for the last week or so, the wax on your floors has been smeary."

"Does Madame think so?"

"Madame does think so. Add a little turpentine while you're melting it in a double saucepan; it's quite easy to do again. You brought up the Vouvray a little too soon. Close the shutters as soon as you've cleared the table; we're in for a heat-wave."

"Very good, Madame. Will Monsieur Ch—Monsieur Peloux be dining?"

"Probably. . . . No *crème-surprise* to-night. We'll just have a strawberry water ice. Coffee in the boudoir."

As she rose from the table, straight and tall, the shape of her legs visible under a dress that moulded her hips, she had ample time to note the "Madame is beautiful" in the butler's discreet glance, and this did not displease her.

"Beautiful," Léa whispered on her way up to the boudoir. "No. . . . No longer. I have now to wear something white near my face, and very pale pink underclothes and tea-gowns. Beautiful! Pish. . . . I hardly need to be that any longer."

All the same, she allowed herself no siesta in the painted silk boudoir, when she had finished with coffee and the newspapers. And it was with battle written on her face that she gave her chauffeur the order: "To Madame Peloux's."

The tree-lined road through the Bois, dry beneath the young, already wind-faded June foliage—the toll-gate—Neuilly—Boulevard d'Inkermann—'How many times have I come this way?' Léa wondered. She began to count, then tired of counting and softened her step on the gravel outside Madame Peloux's house to overhear any sounds coming from it.

'They're in the garden-room,' she concluded.

She had put on more powder before approaching the house and tightened the fine-meshed, misty blue veil under her chin. Her answer to the manservant's formal request to pass through the house was: "No; I'd rather go round by the garden."

A real garden—almost a park—completely surrounded the vast white villa, typical of the outer suburbs of Paris. Madame Peloux's villa had been called "a country residence" in the days when Neuilly was still on the outskirts of Paris. This was apparent from the stables, converted into garages, the other offices with their kennels and wash-houses, not to mention the size of the billiard-room, entrance hall and dining-room.

"This is a handsome investment of Madame Peloux's," her female devotees never tired of repeating—the old toadies who, in exchange for a dinner or a glass of brandy, came there to take a hand against her at bezique or poker. And they added: "But then, where has Madame Peloux not got money invested?"

Walking along in the shade of the acacia trees, between trellised roses and huge clumps of rhododendrons in full blaze, Léa could hear the murmur of voices, and, rising above it, Madame Peloux's shrill nasal trumpet notes and Chéri's dry cackle.

'That child's got an ugly laugh,' she thought. She paused a moment to listen more attentively to a new feminine note; weak, pleasing, quickly drowned by the redoubtable trumpeting. 'That must be the girl,' she said to herself, and a few quick steps brought her to the garden-room with its glass front, from which Madame Peloux burst out with a "Here comes our beautiful friend!"

A little round barrel of a woman, Madame Peloux—in reality Mademoiselle Peloux—had been a ballet-dancer from her tenth to her sixteenth year. Occasionally Léa would search for some trace in Madame Peloux that might recall the once chubby little fair-haired Eros, or the later dimpled nymph, and found nothing except the big implacable eyes, the delicate aggressive nose, and a still coquettish way of standing with her feet in 'the fifth position', like the members of the *corps de ballet*.

Chéri, coming to life in the depths of a rocking-chair, kissed Léa's hand with involuntary grace and ruined his gesture by

exclaiming: "Hang it all! you've put on a veil again, and I loathe veils."

"Will you leave her alone!" Madame Peloux interposed. "You must never ask a woman why she is wearing a veil. We'll never be able to do anything with him," she said to Léa affectionately.

Two women had risen to their feet in the golden shade of a straw blind. One, in mauve, rather coldly offered her hand to Léa, who looked her over from head to foot.

"Goodness, how lovely you are, Marie-Laure! you're perfection itself!"

Marie-Laure deigned to smile. She was a red-haired young woman with brown eyes, whose physical presence alone was enough to take your breath away. She drew attention, almost coquettishly, to the other young woman, by saying: "But would you have recognised my daughter Edmée?"

Léa held out a hand which the girl was reluctant to shake.

"I should have known you, my child, but a schoolgirl alters so quickly, and Marie-Laure alters only to become always more disconcertingly lovely. Are you quite finished with school now?"

"I should hope so, I should hope so," exclaimed Madame Peloux. "You can't go on for ever, hiding her under a bushel, such a miracle of grace and charm, and she's nineteen already!"

"Eighteen," said Marie-Laure, sweetly.

"Eighteen, eighteen! . . . Yes of course, eighteen! Léa, you remember? This child was just making her first Communion the year that Chéri ran away from school, surely you remember? Yes, yes, you did, you little good-for-nothing, you ran away and Léa and I were driven nearly out of our wits!"

"I remember perfectly," Léa said, and she exchanged an imperceptible little nod with Marie-Laure—something corresponding to the "*touché*" of a punctilious fencer.

"You must get her married soon, you must get her married soon!" pursued Madame Peloux, who never failed to repeat a basic truth at least twice. "We'll all come to the wedding."

She brandished her little arms in the air, and the young girl glanced at her with ingenuous alarm.

'She's just the daughter for Marie-Laure,' thought Léa, gazing

at her more closely. 'She has all her mother's dazzling qualities, but in a quieter key; fluffy, ash-brown hair, that looks as if it were powdered; frightened, secretive eyes, and a mouth she avoids opening even to speak or smile. . . . Exactly what Marie-Laure needs as a foil—but how she must hate her!'

Madame Peloux insinuated a maternal smile between Léa and the young girl: "You ought to have seen how well these two young people were getting on together in the garden!"

She pointed to where Chéri stood smoking a cigarette on the other side of the glass partition, his cigarette-holder clenched between his teeth, and his head tilted back to avoid the smoke. The three women looked at the young man who—forehead held at an angle, eyes half-shut, feet together, motionless—looked for all the world like a winged figure hovering dreamily in the air. Léa did not fail to observe the expression of fright and subjugation in the girl's eyes, and she took pleasure in making her tremble by touching her on the arm. Edmée quivered from head to foot, withdrew her arm, and whispered almost savagely, "What?"

"Nothing," Léa replied, "I dropped my glove."

"Come along, Edmée!" Marie-Laure called, negligently.

Silent and docile, the girl walked towards Madame Peloux, who flapped her wings: "Leaving already? Surely not? We must meet again soon, we must meet again soon!"

"It's late," Marie-Laure said, "and you'll be expecting any number of people as it's Sunday afternoon. The child is not accustomed to company."

"Of course not, of course not," Madame Peloux said tenderly. "She's had such a sheltered existence . . . such a lonely life!"

Marie-Laure smiled, and Léa gave her a look as much as to say, "That's one for you!"

"But we'll call again soon."

"Thursday, Thursday! Léa, you'll come to luncheon on Thursday?"

"I'll be here," Léa answered.

Chéri had rejoined Edmée at the entrance to the room and stood beside her, disdaining all conversation. He heard Léa's

promise, and turned round: "Splendid, then we can go for a run in the motor."

"Yes, yes, just the thing for you young people," Madame Peloux insisted, touched by his proposal. "Edmée can sit in front next to Chéri, at the wheel, and the rest of us will go at the back. Youth at the helm, youth at the helm! Chéri, my love, will you ask for Marie-Laure's motor?"

Her small stumpy feet kept slipping on the gravel, but she managed to take her two visitors to the corner of the path, where she handed them over to Chéri. On her return, she found that Léa had taken off her hat and was smoking a cigarette.

"Aren't they sweet, those two!" Madame Peloux gasped. "Don't you think so, Léa?"

"Delicious," Léa breathed out in the same puff as her cigarette smoke. "But really, that Marie-Laure!"

"What's Marie-Laure been up to?" asked Chéri, as he rejoined them.

"How lovely she is!"

"Ah! Ah!" Madame Peloux began in formal assent. "That's true, that's true. She has been really lovely."

Chéri and Léa caught each other's eye and laughed.

"Has been?" Léa emphasized the past tense. "But she's the picture of youth. Not a single wrinkle! And she can wear the palest mauve, such a foul colour! I loathe it and it loathes me."

Madame Peloux raised her big pitiless eyes and thin nose from her brandy-glass.

"The picture of youth, the picture of youth!" yapped Madame Peloux. "Pardon me, pardon me! Marie-Laure had Edmée in 1895, no . . . '94. She'd just run away with a singing-teacher, leaving Khalil Bey flat, though he'd given her the famous pink diamond which . . . No, no! Wait! . . . That must have been the year before!"

The trumpet notes were shrill and off key. Léa put a hand over her ear, and Chéri declared, with some feeling: "Everything would be heavenly on an afternoon like this, if only we could be spared my mother's voice!"

She looked at her son with no sign of anger, accustomed to

his insolence. Dignified, feet dangling, she settled herself back in a basket chair too high for her short legs. In one hand she warmed her glass of brandy. Léa, rocking herself gently to and fro, glanced occasionally at Chéri, who lay sprawled on a cool cane settee, coat unbuttoned, a cigarette dying between his lips, a lock of hair over one eyebrow. 'He's a handsome young black-guard,' she thought admiringly.

There they remained, peacefully side by side, making no effort to talk or be sociable, happy after their own fashion. Years of close familiarity rendered silence congenial, and Chéri slipped back into his lethargy, Léa into her calm. As the afternoon became hotter, Madame Peloux pulled her narrow skirt up to her knees, displaying her tight little sailor's calves, and Chéri ripped off his tie—reproved by Léa in an audible "Tch, tch."

"Oh! leave the child alone," Madame Peloux protested, as from the depths of a dream. "It's much too hot! Would you care for a kimono, Léa?"

"No, thank you. I'm perfectly comfortable."

Their unbuttoned siestas disgusted her. Never once had her young lover caught her untidily dressed, or with her blouse undone, or in her bedroom slippers during the day. "Naked, if need be," she would say, "but squalid, never!"

She picked up her picture paper again, but did not read it. 'These Peloux—mother and son alike!' she thought dreamily. 'They've only to sit themselves down at a good meal or in the heart of the countryside and—snap!—the mother whisks off her stays and the son his waistcoat. They behave like publicans out on a holiday, the pair of them.' She cast a vindictive eye on one of the publicans in question, and saw that he had fallen asleep, his eyelashes spread against his pallid cheeks, his mouth closed. His upper lip, lit from below, reflected two silver pinpoints of light at the twin curves of its delicious Cupid's bow, and Léa was forced to admit that he looked far more like a sleeping god than a licensed victualler.

Without moving from her chair, she gently plucked the lighted cigarette from between Chéri's fingers and put it in the ash-tray.

The hand of the sleeper relaxed and the tapering fingers, tipped with cruel nails, drooped like wilting flowers: a hand not strictly feminine, yet a trifle prettier than one could have wished; a hand she had kissed a hundred times—not in slavish devotion—but kissed for the pleasure of it, for its scent.

From behind her paper, she glanced at Madame Peloux. Was she asleep too? Léa always liked to remain awake while mother and son dozed, allowing her a quiet hour's self-communing in the dappled sunlight of a broiling afternoon. But Madame Peloux was not asleep. She was sitting bolt upright in her wickerwork chair, like a Buddha staring into space, and sipping her *fine-champagne* with the absorption of an alcoholic baby.

'Why doesn't she go to sleep?' Léa wondered. 'It's Sunday. She's lunched well. She's expecting her sponging old cronies to drop in for her five o'clock tea. By rights she ought to be having a snooze. If she's not snoozing, it's because she's up to some devilment or other.'

They had known each other for twenty-five years. Theirs was the hostile intimacy of light women, enriched and then cast aside by one man, ruined by another: the tetchy affection of rivals stalking one another's first wrinkle or white hair. Theirs was the friendship of two practical women of the world, both adept at the money game; but one of them a miser, and the other a sybarite. These bonds count. Rather late in their day, a stronger bond had come to link them more closely: Chéri.

Léa could remember Chéri as a little boy—a marvel of beauty with long curls. When quite small he was known as Fred, and had not yet been nicknamed Chéri.

Sometimes forgotten and sometimes adored, Chéri grew up among wan housemaids and tall sardonic menservants. Although his birth had mysteriously brought wealth to the house, no "Fräulein", no "Miss" was ever to be seen at Chéri's side; and his mother had preserved him, to the accompaniment of piercing shrieks, from "these ghouls".

"Charlotte Peloux, you belong to another age." The speaker was the moribund, mummified, but indestructible Baron de

Berthelley. "Charlotte Peloux, in you I salute the only light woman who ever had the courage to bring up her son as the son of a tart! You belong to another age! You never read, you never travel, you make a point of knowing your neighbour's business, and you abandon your child to the tender mercies of the servants. How perfect! How absolutely About! ¹ . . . Or, better still, how like a novel by Gustav Droz. . . . And to think that you've never heard of either! . . ."

Chéri had enjoyed the full freedom of a profligate upbringing. When barely able to lisp, he was quick to pick up all the backstairs gossip. He shared in the clandestine suppers of the kitchen. His ablutions varied between milky immersions in his mother's orris-root baths and scanty cat-licks with the corner of a towel. He suffered from indigestion after a surfeit of sweets, or from pangs of hunger when no one remembered to give him his supper. He was wretchedly bored at every Battle of Flowers, where Charlotte Peloux would exhibit him—half-naked and catching cold—sitting on drenched roses; but it so happened, when he was twelve, that he had a glorious adventure in an illicit gambling-den, when an American woman allowed him to play with a fistful of louis d'or, and called him "a little masterpiece." At about the same time, Madame Peloux imposed a tutor on her son—an Abbé, whom she packed off at the end of ten months "because," she confessed, "whenever I caught sight of that black robe trailing along the passages, it made me think I was housing a female relation: and God knows there are few things more depressing than having a poor relation to stay!"

At the age of fourteen, Chéri had a taste of school. He didn't believe in it. He broke prison and ran away. Madame Peloux not only found the energy to incarcerate him a second time, but also, when faced with her son's tears and insults, took to her heels with hands over her ears screaming, "I can't bear the sight of it!"

Edmond About (*Roman d'un brave homme*, etc.) and Gustav Droz (*Monsieur, Madame et Bébé*, etc.) light popular novelists of the last half of the nineteenth century, some of whose books appeared in English translation. (*Papa, Mamma and Baby*, illustrated by Morin, 1887.)

I can't bear the sight of it!" So sincere were her cries that she actually fled from Paris, in the company of a man who was young but far from scrupulous. Two years later she came back, alone. It was the last time she succumbed to an amorous impulse.

She found, on her return, that Chéri had shot up too fast; that his cheeks were hollow and his eyes black-ringed; that he dressed like a stable-lad and spoke with a worse accent than ever. She beat her breast, and snatched him back from the boarding school. He utterly refused to work; demanded horses, carriages, jewels; insisted on a substantial monthly allowance; and, when his mother began to beat her breast and shriek like a pea-hen, he put a stop to her cries by saying: "Madame Peloux, ma'am, don't carry on so. My venerable mother, if no one except me drags you down into the gutter, you're likely to die a comfortable death in your downy bed; I don't altogether fancy a trustee for my estate. Your cash is mine. Let me go my own way! Men friends cost next to nothing—a dinner and a bottle of champagne. As for the fair sex, surely Ma'me Peloux, seeing that I take after you, you can trust me not to treat 'em to more than a trinket—if that!"

He pirouetted about while she shed tears and proclaimed herself the happiest of mothers. When Chéri began buying motor-cars, she trembled once more; but he simply advised her: "Keep an eye on the petrol, Ma'me Peloux, if you please!" and sold his horses. He was not above checking the two chauffeurs' books. His calculations were quick and accurate, and the figures he jotted down on slips of paper—dashed off rapidly, round and regular—were in marked contrast to his rather slow and childish handwriting.

At seventeen he was like a little old man, always fussing over his expenses: still good-looking—but skinny and short-winded. More than once Madame Peloux ran into him on the cellar steps, coming up from checking the bottles in the racks and bins.

"Would you believe it?" she said to Léa. "It's too wonderful."

"Much too wonderful," Léa answered, "he'll come to a bad end. Chéri! Show me your tongue!"

He put out his tongue, made a face, and showed other signs

of disrespect. Léa took no notice. She was too intimate a friend, a sort of doting godmother, whom he called by her Christian name.

"Is it true," Léa enquired, "that you were seen last night at a bar, sitting on old Lili's knees?"

"Her knees!" scoffed Chéri. "She hasn't had any for ages. They foundered years ago."

"Isn't it true," Léa persisted with greater severity, "that she made you drink gin laced with pepper? You know gin is bad for the breath!"

On one occasion, Chéri, hurt, snapped back at Léa: "I can't think why you bother me with all these questions. You must have seen what I was up to; you were tucked away in that cubby-hole at the back, with Patron your prize-fighter friend."

"That's perfectly correct," Léa answered, unmoved. "There's nothing of the dissipated schoolboy about Patron. He has other attractions, and a good deal more to recommend him than a perky little face and two black rings round his eyes."

That week Chéri had been out on the razzle in Montmartre and les Halles, consorting with ladies of the town who called him "poppet" and "my pet vice", but he had got no kick out of it: he suffered from migraines and a dry cough. Madame Peloux poured out her heart-breaking woes—"Life is nothing but a series of crosses for us mothers"—to her masseuse, to her stay-maker, Madame Ribot, to old Lili, to the Baron de Berthelley, and thus passed painlessly from the state of being the happiest-of-parents to that of the martyr-mother.

A night in June, when Madame Peloux and Léa and Chéri were together in the garden-room at Neuilly, was to change the destinies of the young man and the middle-aged woman. Chéri's friends had gone off for the evening—little Baxter, a wholesale wine-merchant, and the Vicomte Desmond, a hanger-on of his, barely of age, difficult and arrogant—and so Chéri had returned to the maternal fold, and habit had drawn Léa there also.

For one more evening, in a whole sequence of such occasions, these two women, each suspicious of the other, found themselves

together. They had known each other for twenty years; they shared a past made up of similarly dull evenings; they lacked other friends; and, in their later days, they had become mistrustful, self-indulgent, and cut off from the world, as women are who have lived only for love.

Both were staring in silence at Chéri, who never spoke. Madame Peloux lacked the strength to take her son's health in hand, but hated Léa a little more each time she bent her white neck and glowing cheeks over Chéri's pallid cheek and transparent ear. She would willingly have bled that healthy female neck, already wrinkled by the so-called lines of Venus, in order to give a touch of colour to her slim lily-green son: yet it never occurred to her to take her darling away to the country.

"Chéri, why are you drinking brandy?" Léa scolded.

"Out of politeness to Ma'me Peloux—who would otherwise be drinking alone," Chéri answered.

"What are you going to do to-morrow?"

"Dunno, and you?"

"I'm off to Normandy."

"With?"

"That's none of your business."

"With our friend Spéleïeff?"

"Don't be so stupid. That was over two months ago. You're behind the times. Spéleïeff's in Russia."

"Chéri, darling, what can you be thinking of?" sighed Madame Peloux. "Don't you remember going last month to the charming dinner given by Léa to celebrate the end of the affair? Léa, you've never let me have the recipe for those langoustines I enjoyed so much."

Chéri sat up, his eyes sparkling. "Yes, yes, langoustines, swimming in a creamy sauce! How I'd like some now!"

"You see," Madame Peloux said reproachfully, "he's got no appetite to speak of and yet he's asking for langoustines."

"Shut up!" Chéri snapped. "Léa, are you off to the shady woods with Patron?"

"Certainly not, my boy. Patron and I are merely friends. I'm going on my own."

"Nice to be so rich!" Chéri threw out.

"I'll take you with me, if you like: there'll be nothing to do but eat and drink and sleep. . . ."

"Where is this place of yours?" He had risen to his feet and was standing over her.

"You know Honfleur—the Côte de Grâce—don't you? Sit down; you're green in the face. Now as you go down the Côte de Grâce, you know those farm gates where we always say, in passing, your mother and I . . ."

She turned round to where Madame Peloux was sitting. Madame Peloux had disappeared. The discretion with which she had faded away was something so unlike the normal Charlotte Peloux, that they looked at each other and laughed in surprise.

Chéri sat down close to Léa. "I'm tired," he said.

"You're ruining your health."

He drew himself up in his chair, with offended vanity. "Oh! I'm still in good enough fettle, you know."

"Good enough! For others perhaps . . . but not . . . not for me, I'd have you know."

"Too green?"

"The very word I was looking for. So why don't you come down to the country? No nonsense, of course. Ripe strawberries, fresh cream, cakes, grilled spring chicken . . . that's just what you need—and no women."

He let himself snuggle up to Léa's elbow and shut his eyes.

"No women . . . grand . . . Léa, tell me, you're my pal? You are? Then let's be off. Women indeed! I'm fed up with 'em. Women! I've seen all they've got to show."

These vulgarities were muttered in a drowsy voice. Léa listened to his soft tone, and felt his warm breath against her ear. He had taken hold of her long string of pearls and was rolling the larger ones between his fingers. She slipped her arm under his head and so accustomed was she to treating the boy in this way that, almost without thinking, she pulled him towards her and rocked him in her arms.

"How comfy I am!" he sighed. "You're a good pal. I'm so comfy."

Léa smiled, as though hearing praise she valued intensely. Chéri seemed to be ready to drop off to sleep. She looked very closely at his glistening, almost dewy, eyelashes sunk flat against the cheeks, and then at the cheeks themselves, hollowed by his joyless dissipation. His upper lip, shaved that morning, was already bluish, and the pink lampshades lent his mouth an artificial colour.

"No women!" Chéri exclaimed, as though dreaming. "Then . . . kiss me!"

Taken by surprise, Léa made no movement.

"Kiss me, I tell you!"

He rapped out his order, frowning, and Léa felt embarrassed by the rekindled gleam in his eyes. It was as if someone had switched on the light. She shrugged her shoulders and kissed the forehead so close to her lips. He drew his arms tighter around her neck, and pulled her down towards him.

She shook her head only at the very instant that their lips touched, then she remained absolutely motionless, and held her breath like someone listening. When he released his hold, she broke away from him, rose to her feet, took a deep breath, and put a hand up to tidy her unruffled hair. She turned to him, rather pale and with rueful eyes, and said, teasingly: "That was a bright idea!"

He lay far back in the rocking-chair, speechless, and scrutinized her with a suspicious, questioning gaze, so that she asked: "What is it?"

"Nothing," Chéri said. "I know what I wanted to know."

She blushed with humiliation, then skilfully defended herself.

"What do you know? That I like your mouth? My poor child, I've kissed uglier. What does that prove? D'you think I'm going to fling myself at your feet and cry, 'Take me!' You talk as if you've known only nice young girls! D'you imagine I'm going to lose my head because of a kiss?"

She grew calmer while speaking and wished to prove her self-control.

"Listen, child," she persisted, as she leaned over him, "d'you think a handsome mouth means anything to me?"

She smiled down at him, completely sure of herself, but unaware that there remained on her face a sort of very faint quiver, an appealing sadness, and that her smile was like a rainbow after a sudden storm.

"I'm perfectly calm. Even if I were to kiss you again, or even if we . . ." She stopped and pouted with scorn. "No, no, I really can't see you and me doing that."

"Nor could you see us doing what we did just now," Chéri said, taking time over his words. "And yet you don't mind doing it, and not in a hurry, either. So now you're thinking of going further, are you? *I* never suggested such a thing."

They faced each other like enemies. Léa was afraid to reveal a desire she had not yet had time to develop or to disguise; she resented this child, so suddenly cold and perhaps derisive.

"You're right," she conceded lightly. "Let's say no more about it. Shall we say instead that I'm offering to put you out to grass! And the food will be good . . . *my* food, in other words."

"We'll see," Chéri answered. "Shall I bring the Renouhard tourer?"

"Of course; you're not going to leave it behind with Charlotte."

"I'll pay for the petrol, but you'll feed the chauffeur."

Léa burst out laughing. "I'll feed the chauffeur! Ha! Ha! There speaks the son of Madame Peloux! Get along with you! You forget nothing. . . . I'm not usually inquisitive, but I should love to eavesdrop when you're making up to a woman."

She sank into a chair and fanned herself. A sphinx-moth and a number of long-legged mosquitoes hovered round the lamps; scents of the countryside drifted in from the garden, now that night had fallen. A sudden waft from an acacia burst in upon them, so distinct, so active, that they both turned round, half expecting to see it advancing towards them.

"It's the rose-acacia," Léa said.

"Yes," Chéri said. "But to-night it has sipped a draught of orange-flower water."

She stared at him, in vague admiration, astonished that he had hit upon such an idea. He was breathing in the scent in helpless rapture, and she turned away, suddenly fearful lest he might call her; but he did call, and she went to him.

She went to kiss him, on an impulse of resentment and selfishness, and half thinking to chastise him. 'Just you wait, my boy. . . . It's all too true that you've a pretty mouth, and, this time, I'm going to take my fill because I want to—and then I'll leave you, I don't care what you may say. Now . . .'

Her kiss was such that they reeled apart, drunk, deaf, breathless, trembling as if they had just been fighting. She stood up again in front of him, but he did not move from the depths of his chair, and she taunted him under her breath, "Well? . . . Well?" and waited for an insult. Instead, he held out his arms, opened his vague beautiful hands, tilted his head back as if he had been struck, and let her see beneath each eyelash the glint of a shining tear. He babbled indeterminate words—a whole animal chant of desire, in which she could distinguish her name—"darling"—"I want you"—"I'll never leave you"—a song to which she listened, solicitous, leaning over him, as if unwittingly she had hurt him to the quick.

When Léa recalled their first summer in Normandy, she would sum it up impartially: "I've had other naughty little boys through my hands, more amusing than Chéri, more likable, too, and more intelligent. But all the same, never one to touch him."

"It's funny," she confided to the old Baron de Berthelley, towards the end of the summer of 1906, "but sometimes I think I'm in bed with a Chinese or an African."

"Have you ever had a Chinaman or a Negro?"

"Never."

"Well then?"

"I don't know. I can't explain. It's just an impression."

The impression had grown upon her slowly, also an astonishment she had not always been able to conceal. Her earliest memories of their idyll were abundantly rich, but only in pictures of delicious food, superb fruit, and the pleasure of taking

pains over her country larder. She could still see Chéri—paler in the blazing sunlight—dragging along his exhausted body beneath the lime-tree tunnels in Normandy, or asleep on the sun-warmed paving beside a pond.

Léa used to rouse Chéri from sleep to cram him with strawberries and cream, frothy milk, and corn-fed chicken. With wide, vacant eyes, as though dazed, he would sit at dinner watching the mazy motions of the moths round the bowl of roses, and then look at his wristwatch to see whether the time had come to go to bed: while Léa, disappointed but unresentful, pondered over the unfulfilled promises of the kiss at Neuilly and good-naturedly bided her time.

“I’ll keep him cooped up in this fattening-pen till the end of August, if need be. Then, back in Paris again—ouf!—I’ll pack him off to his precious studies.”

She went to bed mercifully early, so that Chéri—after nuzzling against her till he had hollowed out a selfishly comfortable position—might get some sleep. Sometimes, when the lamp was out, she would watch a pool of moonlight shimmering over the polished floor, or listen, through the chorus of rustling aspens and shrilling crickets, unceasingly by night or day, to the deep, retriever-like sighs that rose from Chéri’s breast.

‘Why can’t I go to sleep? Is there something wrong with me?’ she vaguely wondered. ‘It’s not this boy’s head on my shoulder—I’ve held heavier. The weather’s wonderful. I’ve ordered him a good plate of porridge for to-morrow. Already his ribs stick out less. Then why can’t I go to sleep? Yes, of course, I remember. . . . I’m going to send for Patron, the boxer, to give the boy some training. We’ve plenty of time between us, Patron and I, to spring a surprise on Madame Peloux.’

She fell asleep, lying stretched out on her back between the cool sheets, the dark head of her naughty little boy resting on her left breast. She fell asleep, to be aroused sometimes—but all too rarely—by a waking desire of Chéri’s towards the break of day.

Patron actually arrived after they had been two months in their country retreat, with his suitcase, his small pound-and-a-

half dumb-bells, his black tights, his six-ounce gloves, and his leather boxing-boots, laced down to the toe. Patron, with his girl-ish voice, his long eyelashes, and his splendid tanned skin, as brown as the leather of his luggage—he hardly looked naked when he took off his shirt. And Chéri, by turns peevish, listless, or jealous of Patron's smooth strength, started the slow, oft-repeated movements. They were tiresome, but they did him good.

"One . . . sss . . . two . . . sss . . . I can't hear you breathing . . . three . . . sss. . . . Don't think I can't see you cheating there with your knee . . . sss. . . ."

An awning of lime foliage filtered the August sunlight. The bare bodies of instructor and pupil were dappled with purple reflections from the thick red carpet spread out upon the gravel. Léa watched the lessons with keen attention. Sometimes during the quarter of an hour's boxing, Chéri, drunk with new-found strength, lost all control and, red-faced with anger, attempted a foul blow. Rock-like, Patron stood up to his swings, and from the height of his Olympian glory let fall oracular words—words of wisdom that packed more weight than his proverbial punch.

"Steady on now! That left eye's wandering a bit! If I hadn't stopped myself in time, it would have had a nasty taste of the stitches on my right glove."

"I slipped," Chéri said, enraged.

"It's not a question of balance," Patron went on, "it's a question of morale. You'll never make a boxer."

"My mother won't let me, isn't that a pity?"

"Whether your mother lets you or not, you'll never make a boxer, because you've got a rotten temper. Rotten tempers and boxing don't go together. Aren't I right, Madame Léa?"

Léa smiled, and revelled in the warm sun, sitting still and watching the bouts between these two men, both young and both stripped. In her mind she kept comparing them. 'How handsome Patron is—as solid as a house! And the boy's shaping well. You don't find knees like his running about the streets every day of the week, or I'm no judge. His back, too, is . . . will be . . . marvellous. Where the devil did Mother Peloux drop her line to fish up a child like that? And the set of his head!

quite a statue! But what a little beast he is! When he laughs, you'd swear it's a greyhound snarling!' She felt happy and maternal—bathed in quiet virtue. 'I'd willingly change him for anyone else,' she said to herself, with Chéri naked in the afternoon beside her under the lime-tree-bower, or with Chéri naked in the morning on her ermine rug, or Chéri naked in the evening on the edge of the warm fountain. 'Yes, handsome as he is, I'd willingly make a change, if it weren't a question of conscience!'

She confessed her indifference to Patron.

"And yet," Patron objected, "the lad's very nicely made. There's muscles on him now such as you don't see on our French lads; his are more like a coloured boy's—though he couldn't look any whiter, I must say. Nice little muscles they are, and not too showy. He'll never have biceps like melons."

"I should hope not, Patron! But then, you know, I didn't take him on for his boxing!"

"Of course not," Patron acquiesced, letting his long lashes droop, "there's—your feelings to be considered."

He was always embarrassed by Léa's unveiled allusions to sex, and by her smile—the insistence of the smiling eyes she brought to bear on him whenever she spoke of love.

"Of course," Patron tried another tack, "if he's not altogether satisfactory . . ."

Léa laughed: "Altogether! no . . . but I find being disinterested is its own reward. Just as you do, Patron."

"Oh! me . . ." He waited in fear and hope for the question that did not fail to follow.

"Always the same, Patron? You still won't give way an inch?"

"I won't give way, Madame Léa, and I've just had a letter from Liane by the midday post. She says she's all alone, that I've no good reasons for refusing, and that her two admirers have left her."

"Well?"

"Well, I don't believe it! I won't give way, because she won't give way. She's ashamed, she says, of a man who works for his living—specially when it pulls him out of bed so early every day for his training—a man who gives boxing lessons and

teaches Swedish gymnastics. We've only got to meet, and the row starts all over again. 'Anyone'd think,' she shouts at me, 'that I'm not in a position to support the man I love!' That shows very nice feelings, I don't say it doesn't, but it doesn't fit in with my ideas. Everyone's funny about something. It's just like you said, Madame Léa, it's all a question of conscience."

They were talking in low tones under the trees: he prudish and half naked; she dressed in white, the colour flaming in her cheeks. They were enjoying the pleasure of a friendly understanding: they shared the same taste for the simple things of life, good health and a sort of plebeian decency. And yet Léa would not have been shocked had Patron received handsome presents from a beautiful and expensive woman like Liane. "Fair exchange is no robbery." And she did her best to break down Patron's "funny feelings" by arguments based on homespun justice. These leisurely conversations always revealed their worship of the same twin deities—love and money, and would drift away from money and love to come back to Chéri and his deplorable upbringing, to his exceptional good looks ("harmless, after all," as Léa would say) and to his character ("virtually non-existent," as Léa would say). They had a taste for sharing confidences, and a dislike of new words or ideas, which they satisfied in these long talks. They were often disturbed by the preposterous apparition of Chéri, whom they thought either asleep or motoring down some baking hot road—Chéri, looming into sight, half naked, but equipped with an account book, a stylo behind his ear.

"Look at our Mister Adding-machine," Patron said admiringly. "All got up as a clerk in a bank."

"What can this mean?" Chéri shouted from afar. "Three hundred and twenty francs for petrol? Somebody must be swilling the stuff! We've been out four times in the last fortnight—and seventy-seven francs for oil!"

"The motor goes to the market every day," Léa replied. "And while we're on the subject, it appears your chauffeur had three helpings of the joint for his dinner. Don't you think that's stretching our agreement a bit far? . . . Whenever a bill sticks in your throat, you look just like your mother."

At a loss for an answer, he stood uncertain for a moment, shifting from one slender foot to the other, poised with winged grace like a young Mercury. This always made Madame Peloux swoon with delight and yelp, "Me when I was eighteen! Winged feet! winged feet!" He cast about for some insolent retort, his whole face a-quiver, his mouth half-open, his forehead jutting forward, in a tense attitude that showed off to advantage the peculiar and diabolic upward twist of his eyebrows.

"Don't bother to think of an answer," Léa said kindly. "I know you hate me. Come and kiss me. Handsome devil. Fallen angel. Silly goose. . . ."

He came, calmed by the softness of her voice, yet ruffled by her words. Seeing them together, Patron once again let the truth flower on his guileless lips.

"As far as first-rate bodies go, Monsieur Chéri, you have one all right. But whenever I look at it, Monsieur Chéri, I feel that if I was a woman I'd say to myself: 'I'll come back again in ten years' time'."

"You hear, Léa? He says in ten years' time," Chéri said insinuatingly, pushing away the head of his mistress as she leaned towards him. "What do you think of that?"

But she did not deign to listen. The young body owed to her its renewed vigour, and she began patting it all over, touching it anywhere and everywhere, on the cheek, on the leg, on the behind, with the irreverent pleasure of a nanny.

"What d'you get out of being spiteful?" Patron then asked.

Chéri allowed a savage, inscrutable gaze to sweep over every inch of the waiting Hercules before he answered. "I find it comforting. You wouldn't understand."

In fact, Léa herself understood precious little about Chéri after three months' intimacy. If she still talked to Patron, who now came only on Sundays, or to Berthelley, who arrived without being invited but left again two hours later, about "sending Chéri back to his blessed studies", it was because the phrase had become a kind of habit, and as though to excuse herself for having kept him there so long. She kept on setting a limit to his stay, and then exceeding it. She was waiting.

"The weather is so lovely. And then his trip to Paris last week tired him. And, besides, it's better for me to get thoroughly sick of him."

For the first time in her life, she waited in vain for what had never before failed her: complete trust on the part of her young lover, a self-surrender to confessions, candours, endless secrets—those hours in the depths of the night when, in almost filial gratitude, a young man unrestrainedly pours out his tears, his private likes and dislikes, on the kindly bosom of a mature and trusted friend.

'They've always told me everything in the past,' she thought obstinately. 'I've always known just what they were worth—what they were thinking and what they wanted. But this boy, this brat . . . No, that would really be the limit.'

He was now strong, proud of his nineteen years, gay at meals and impatient in bed; even so he gave away nothing but his body, and remained as mysterious as an odalisque. Tender? Yes, if an involuntary cry or an impulsive hug is an indication of tenderness. But the moment he spoke, he was "spiteful" again, careful to divulge nothing of his true self.

How often at dawn had Léa held him in her arms, a lover soothed, relaxed, with half-closed lids! Each morning his eyes and his mouth returned to life more beautiful, as though every waking, every embrace, had fashioned them anew! How often, at such moments, had she indulged her desire to master him, her sensual longing to hear his confession, and pressed her forehead against his, whispering, "Speak. Say something. Tell me . . ."

But no confession came from those curved lips, scarcely anything indeed but sulky or frenzied phrases woven round "Nounoune"—the name he had given her when a child and the one he now used in the throes of his pleasure, almost like a cry for help.

"Yes, I assure you, he might be a Chinese or an African," she declared to Anthime de Berthelley, and added, "I can't tell you why." The impression was strong but confused, and she felt lazily incompetent to find words for the feeling that she and Chéri did not speak the same language.

It was the end of September when they returned to Paris. Chéri went straight to Neuilly, the very first evening, to “spring a surprise” on Madame Peloux. He brandished chairs, cracked nuts with his fist, leaped on to the billiard-table and played cowboy in the garden at the heels of the terrified watch-dogs.

“Ouf!” Léa sighed, as she entered her house in the Avenue Bugeaud, alone. “How wonderful!—a bed to myself!”

But at ten o’clock the following night, she was sipping coffee and trying not to find the evening too long or the dining-room too large, when a nervous cry was forced from her lips. Chéri had suddenly appeared, framed in the doorway—Chéri, wafted on silent, winged feet.

He was not speaking or showing any sign of affection, but just running towards her.

“Are you mad?”

Shrugging his shoulders, disdaining all explanations, just running towards her. Never asking “Do you love me?” “Have you already forgotten me?” Running towards her.

A moment later they were lying in the middle of Léa’s great brass-encumbered bed. Chéri pretended to be worn out and sleepy. This made it easier to grit his teeth and keep his eyes tight shut, suffering as he was from a furious attack of taciturnity. Yet, through his silence, she was listening as she lay beside him, listening with delight to the distant delicate vibration, to the imprisoned tumult thrumming within a body that sought to conceal its agony, its gratitude and love.

“Why didn’t your mother tell me this herself at dinner last night?”

“She thought it better it should come from me.”

“No!”

“That’s what she said.”

“And you?”

“What about me?”

“Do you think it better?”

Chéri raised uncertain eyes to Léa’s. “Yes.” He appeared to think it over a moment and repeated: “Yes, far better, in fact.”

In order not to embarrass him, Léa looked away towards the window.

The August morning was dark with warm rain, which fell vertically on the already rusted foliage of the three plane-trees in the garden court.

"It might be autumn," she said, and sighed.

"What's the matter?" Chéri asked.

She looked at him in astonishment. "Nothing, I don't like the rain, that's all."

"Oh! All right, I thought . . ."

"What?"

"I thought something was wrong."

She could not help giving a frank laugh. "Wrong with me, because you're getting married? No, listen . . . you're . . . you're so funny."

She seldom laughed outright, and her merriment vexed Chéri. He shrugged his shoulders and made the usual grimace while lighting a cigarette, jutting out his chin too far and protruding his lower lip.

"You oughtn't to smoke before luncheon," Léa said.

He made some impertinent retort she did not hear. She was listening to the sound of her own voice and its daily lectures, echoing away down the past five years. 'It's like the endless repetition in opposite looking-glasses,' she thought. Then, with a slight effort, she returned to reality and cheerfulness.

"It's lucky for me that there'll soon be someone else to stop you smoking on an empty stomach."

"Oh! *she* won't be allowed to have a say in anything," Chéri declared. "She's going to be my wife, isn't she? Let her kiss the sacred ground I tread on, and thank her lucky stars for the privilege. And that will be that."

He exaggerated the thrust of his chin, clenched his teeth on his cigarette-holder, parted his lips, and, as he stood there in his white silk pyjamas, succeeded only in looking like an Asiatic prince grown pale in the impenetrable obscurity of palaces.

Léa drew the folds of her pink dressing-gown closer about

her—the pink she called “indispensable”. She was lazily turning over ideas which she found tiresome, ideas that she decided to hurl, one by one, as missiles against Chéri’s assumed composure.

“Well, why are you marrying the child?”

He put both elbows on the table and, unconsciously, assumed the composed features of his mother. “Well, you see, my dear girl . . .”

“Call me Madame or Léa. I’m neither your housemaid nor a pal of your own age.”

She sat straight up in her armchair and clipped her words without raising her voice. He wanted to answer back. He looked defiantly at the beautiful face, a little pale under its powder, and at the frank blue light of her searching eyes. But he softened, and conceded, in a tone most unusual for him, “Nounoune, you asked me to explain. . . . It had to come to this in the end. And besides, there are big interests at stake.”

“Whose?”

“Mine,” he said without a smile. “The girl has a considerable fortune of her own.”

“From her father?”

He rocked himself to and fro, his feet in the air. “Oh, how do I know? What a question! I suppose so. You’d hardly expect the fair Marie-Laure to draw fifteen hundred thousand out of her own bank account, would you? Fifteen hundred thousand, and some decent family jewels into the bargain.”

“And how much have you?”

“Oh, I’ve more than that of my own,” he said with pride.

“Then you don’t need any more money?”

He shook his smooth head and it caught the light like blue watered silk. “Need . . . need . . . ? You know perfectly well we don’t look at money in the same way. It’s something on which we never see eye to eye.”

“I’ll do you the justice to say that you’ve spared me any reference to it during the last five years.” She leaned towards him and put her hand on his knee. “Tell me, child, how much have you put by from your income in these five years?”

He cavorted like a clown, laughed, and rolled at Léa's feet, but she pushed him aside with her toe.

"No, tell me the truth . . . fifty thousand a year, or sixty? Tell me, sixty? Seventy?"

He sat down on the carpet facing away from Léa, and laid his head back on her lap. "Aren't I worth it, then?"

He stretched out to his full length, turned his head to look up at her, and opened his eyes wide. They looked black, but their true shade, Léa knew, was a dark almost reddish brown. As though to indicate her choice of what was rarest among so much beauty, she put her forefinger on his eyebrows, his eyelids and the corners of his mouth. At moments this lover, whom she slightly despised, inspired her with a kind of respect by his outward form. 'To be as handsome as that amounts to nobility,' she said to herself.

"Tell me, child, how does this young person feel about you?"

"She loves me. She admires me. She never says a word."

"And you—how do you behave with her?"

"I don't," he answered simply.

"Delightful love duets," Léa said, dreamily.

He sat up, crossing his legs tailor-fashion.

"You seem to me to be thinking a lot about her," he said severely. "Don't you think of yourself at all, in this upheaval?"

She gazed at Chéri with an astonishment that made her look years younger—eyebrows raised and lips half open.

"Yes, you, Léa. You, the victimized heroine. You, the one sympathetic character in all this, since you're being dropped."

He had become rather pale, and his tough handling of Léa seemed to be hurting him.

Léa smiled. "But, my darling, I've not the slightest intention of changing my life. Now and then, during the next week, I'll come across a pair of socks, a tie, a handkerchief on my shelves . . . and when I say a week . . . you know in what excellent order my shelves are kept! Oh, yes, and I'll have the bathroom re-done. I've got an idea of putting in encrusted glass. . . ."

She fell silent and assumed an almost greedy look as she traced

a vague outline with her finger. Chéri continued to look vindictive.

"You aren't pleased! What do you want, then? Do you expect me to go to Normandy to hide my grief? To pine away? To stop dyeing my hair? To have Madame Peloux rushing to my bedside?" And she imitated Madame Peloux, flapping her arms and trumpeting: "The shadow of her former self, the shadow of her former self! The poor unfortunate creature has aged a hundred years, a hundred years! Is that what you want?"

He had been listening with a smile that died on his lips, and a trembling of the nostrils that might be due to emotion. "Yes!" he cried.

Léa rested her smooth, bare, heavy arms on Chéri's shoulders.

"My poor boy! But at that rate, I ought to have died four or five times already! To lose a little lover. . . . To exchange one naughty little boy. . . ." She added in lower, lighter tones: "I've grown used to it!"

"We all know that," he said harshly. "I don't give a damn—d'you hear me?—I don't give a single damn that I wasn't your first lover. What I should have liked, or rather what would have been . . . fitting . . . decent . . . is to be your last." With a twist of his shoulders, he shrugged off her superb arms. "After all, what I am saying to you now is for your own good."

"I understand perfectly. You think only of me. I think only of your fiancée. That's all very nice, all very natural. It's clear that we both have hearts of gold."

She rose, waiting for some outrageous rejoinder. But he said nothing, and it hurt her to see for the first time a look of discouragement on his face.

She bent over and put her hands under his armpits.

"Now then, come along, get your clothes on. I've only to put on my dress, I'm ready underneath, and what in the world is there to do on a day like this except to go to Schwabe and choose a pearl for you? You see, I must give you a wedding-present."

He jumped up, his face aglow: "Top-hole! A pearl for my shirt-front! A pale pink pearl. I know the very one!"

"Not on your life! A white one, something masculine for pity's sake! Don't tell me, I know which one just as well as you. It'll ruin me, as usual. However, think of the money I'm going to save when you're out of the way!"

Chéri adopted a more reticent attitude. "Oh, that . . . that depends on my successor."

Léa turned back at the door of her boudoir and gave him her gayest smile, showing her strong teeth and the fresh blue of her eyes skilfully darkened by bistre.

"Your successor? A couple of francs and a packet of cigarettes! And a glass of cassis on Sunday—that's all the job will be worth! And I'll settle money on your children."

They both became extremely gay for the next few weeks. Chéri's official duties as a fiancé separated them for a few hours each day, sometimes for a night or two. "We mustn't let them lose confidence," Chéri declared. Léa, kept by Madame Peloux at a safe distance from Neuilly, satisfied her curiosity by plying Chéri with a hundred questions. Whenever he came back to Léa's house, he was full of his own importance and heavy with secrets which he at once divulged. He was like a schoolboy playing truant.

"Oh my sainted aunt!" he shouted one day, cramming his hat down on Léa's portrait-bust. "The goings-on at the Peloux Palace Hôtel ever since yesterday!"

She began by scolding him, laughing already in anticipation.

"Take your hat off that, in the first place. And in the second, don't invoke your wretched aunt in my house. Well, what's been happening now?"

"A riot, Nounoune! A riot's broken out among the ladies. Marie-Laure and Ma'me Peloux are scratching each other's eyes out over the marriage settlement!"

"No!"

"Yes! It was a superb sight. (Look out for the olives. . . . I'm going to impersonate Ma'me Peloux as a windmill. . . .) 'Separate bank accounts! Separate bank accounts! Why not a trustee? It's a personal insult, a personal insult. You forget that

my son has his own fortune! . . . May I inform you, Madame . . . ”

“She called her Madame?”

“She most certainly did. ‘Let me tell you, Madame, that my son has never had a ha’porth of debts since he came of age and the list of his investments bought since 1910 is worth . . . ’ is worth this, that and the other, including the skin off my nose, plus the fat off my bottom. In short, Catherine de Medici in person! But even more artful, of course!”

Léa’s blue eyes glistened with tears of merriment. “Oh Chéri! you’ve never been funnier in your life! What about the other? The fair Marie-Laure?”

“Her? Oh! terrible, Nounoune. That woman must have at least a dozen corpses in her wake. Dolled up in jade green, red hair, painted to look eighteen, and the inevitable smile. The trumpeting of my revered Mamma failed to make her bat an eyelid. She held her fire till the assault was over, then she came out with: ‘It might perhaps be wiser, dear Madame, not to talk too loudly about all the money your son put by in 1910 and the years following. . . .’ ”

“Bang! Straight between the eyes! . . . Between yours. Where were you while all this was going on?”

“Me? In the large armchair.”

“You were actually in the room?” She stopped laughing, and eating. “You were there? What did you do?”

“Cracked a joke, of course. Ma’mé Peloux had just seized hold of a valuable piece of bric-à-brac, to avenge my honour, when I stopped her without even getting up. ‘My adored mother, calm yourself. Follow my example, follow that of my charming mother-in-law, who’s being as sweet as honey . . . as sweet as sugar.’ And that’s how I managed to arrange that the settlement should apply only to property acquired after marriage.”

“I simply don’t understand.”

“The famous sugar plantations that the poor little Prince Ceste left to Marie-Laure by his will. . . . ”

“Yes?”

"Forged will! Fury of the Ceste family! Lawsuit pending! Now d'you get it?"

He crowed.

"I get it. But how did you get hold of the story?"

"Ah! I'll tell you! Old Lili has just pounced with her full weight upon the younger of the Ceste boys, who's only seventeen and religious. . . ."

"Old Lili? What a nightmare!"

"And he babbles family secrets in her ear between every kiss. . . ."

"Chéri! I feel sick!"

"And old Lili tipped me off at Mamma's At Home last Sunday. She simply adores me! Besides, she respects me because I've never wanted to go to bed with her. . . ."

"I should hope not!" Léa sighed. "Yet all the same . . ." She broke off to reflect, and it seemed to Chéri her enthusiasm was flagging.

"Well, you must say it was pretty smart of me, eh?"

He leaned across the table; and the sunshine, playing over the silver and the white table-cloth, lit him up like a row of foot-lights.

"Yes . . ." 'All the same,' she was thinking, 'that poisonous Marie-Laure simply treated him like a ponce . . .'

"Is there any cream cheese, Nounoune?"

"Yes . . ." ' . . . and he showed no more surprise than if she had thrown him a flower. . . .'

"Nounoune, will you let me have that address? the address of the place where you get your cream cheese—for the new cook I've engaged for October?"

"Are you mad? It's home-made. I *have* a cook, you know. Think of the *sauce aux moules* and *vol-au-vent*!" ' . . . it's true I've practically kept the boy for the last five years. . . . But all the same he has an income of three hundred thousand francs a year. That's the point. Can you be a ponce with three hundred thousand a year? But why ever not? It doesn't depend on the amount, but on the man. . . . There are some men I could have

given half a million to, and that wouldn't make them a ponce. But how about Chéri? After all, I have never actually given him any money. All the same . . .'

"All the same," she broke into speech. "She treated you like a gigolo!"

"Who did?"

"Marie-Laure!"

He brightened at once, like a child.

"Didn't she? Didn't she just, Nounoune? That's what she meant, wasn't it?"

"So it seems to me."

Chéri raised his glass of Château-Chalon, almost the colour of brandy. "So here's to Marie-Laure! What a compliment, eh? And if anyone can still say it of me when I'm your age, I shan't ask anything better!"

"If that's enough to make you happy . . ."

She listened to him absent-mindedly till the end of luncheon. Accustomed to her half-silences and her worldly wisdom, he asked for nothing better than the usual maternal homilies—"Take the brownest crusts. Don't eat so much new bread. . . . You've never learnt how to choose a fruit. . . ." All the time, secretly disgruntled, she was reproaching herself, 'I must make up my mind what I want! What would I really have liked him to do? Get up on his hind legs and hiss "Madame, you have insulted me! Madame, I am not what you take me for!" I'm responsible, when all's said and done. I've spoon-fed him, I've stuffed him with good things. . . . Who in the world would have thought that one day he'd want to play the paterfamilias? It never occurred to me! Even supposing it had—as Patron would say, "Nature will out." Even supposing Patron had accepted Liane's proposals, his nature would have come out all right if anyone had hinted at the fact in his hearing. But Chéri . . . has Chéri's nature. He's just Chéri. He's . . .'

"What were you saying, child?" she interrupted her thoughts to ask. "I wasn't listening."

"I was saying that never again—never, do you hear me—will

anything make me laugh so much as my scene with Marie-Laure!"

—"There you are," Léa concluded her thoughts, "it . . . it merely made him laugh."

Slowly she rose to her feet, as though tired. Chéri put an arm round her waist, but she pushed it away.

"What day is your wedding to be, now I come to think of it?"

"Monday week."

His candour and detachment terrified her. "That's fantastic!"

"Why fantastic, Nounoune?"

"You don't look as if you were giving it a thought!"

"I'm not," he said, calmly. "Everything's been arranged. Ceremony at two o'clock, saving us all the fuss and rush of a wedding breakfast. Instead, a tea party at Ma'me Peloux's. After that, sleepers, Italy, the Lakes. . . ."

"Are the Lakes back in fashion?"

"They are. There'll be villas, hotels, motor-drives, restaurants, like Monte-Carlo, eh?"

"But the girl! There's always the girl. . . ."

"Of course there's the girl. She's not much, but she's there!"

"And I'm no longer there."

Chéri had not expected her to say this and showed it. His face became disfigured, and he suddenly turned white about the mouth. He controlled his breath to avoid an audible gasp, and became himself again.

"Nounoune, you'll always be there."

"Monsieur overwhelms me."

"There'll always be you, Nounoune . . ." and he laughed awkwardly, "whenever I need you to do something for me."

She did not answer. She bent to pick up a tortoiseshell comb that had fallen to the floor and pushed it back in her hair, humming to herself. She went on humming a little snatch of a song in front of a looking-glass, pleased with herself, proud of having kept her self-control so easily, covered up so successfully the only emotional moment of their separation, proud of having held back words that must never be said: "Speak . . . beg for what

you want, demand it, put your arms round my neck. . . . You have suddenly made me happy. . . .”

Madame Peloux must have been talking a great deal and for a long time before Léa appeared. The high colour on her cheeks emphasised the sparkle of her large eyes, which expressed only an indiscreet and inscrutable watchfulness. This Sunday she was wearing a black afternoon dress with a very narrow skirt, and nobody could fail to have observed that her feet were tiny and her stays too tight. She stopped talking, took a little sip from the petal-thin brandy glass warming in her hand, and nodded at Léa in lazy contentment.

“Isn’t it a lovely day? Such weather, such weather! Would any one believe we’re in the middle of October?”

“Oh, no, never. . . . Most certainly not!” two obsequious voices answered in chorus.

Beside the curving garden path a stream of red salvias wound between the banks of grey-mauve Michaelmas daisies. Golden butterflies flitted as if it were summer and the scent of chrysanthemums, strengthened by the hot sun, was wafted into the garden-room. A yellowing birch tree trembled in the wind above beds of tea roses, where the last of the bees still were busy.

“But what’s this weather,” yelled Madame Peloux, suddenly waxing lyrical, “but what’s this weather, when compared to what *they* must be having in Italy?”

“Yes, indeed! . . . Just what I was thinking!” the attendant voices echoed.

Léa turned with a frown in their direction. ‘If only they would hold their tongues,’ she thought.

The Baroness de la Berche and Madame Aldonza were sitting at a card-table, playing piquet. Madame Aldonza, an aged ballerina, with legs eternally swathed in bandages, was distorted with rheumatism, and wore her shiny black wig a little askew. Opposite her, a head or more taller, the Baroness squared her rigid shoulders like a country priest’s. Her face was large and had grown alarmingly masculine with age. She was a bristling

bush of hair—hair in her ears, tufts in her nostrils and on her lip, and rough hairs between her fingers.

"Baroness, don't forget I made ninety," Madame Aldonza bleated like a goat.

"Score it, score it, my good friend! All I want is to see everyone happy."

An endless flow of honied words masked her savage cruelty. Léa looked at her closely as if for the first time, felt disgusted, and turned back to Madame Peloux. 'Charlotte, at least, *looks* human,' she thought.

"What's the matter with you, my Léa? You don't seem your usual self?" Madame Peloux enquired tenderly.

Léa drew up her handsome figure and answered: "Of course I am, Lolotte dear . . . it's so comfortable here in your house, I was merely relaxing," thinking all the while, 'Careful now . . . she's just as cruel as the other,' and she at once assumed an expression of flattering contentment, of dreamy repletion, and accentuated it by sighing, "I lunched too well. . . . I really must get thinner. I shall start a strict diet from to-morrow."

Madame Peloux flapped her hands and simpered.

"Isn't a broken heart enough to do that?"

"Oh, oh, oh! Ha-ha! Ho-ho!" guffawed Madame Aldonza and the Baroness de la Berche. "Ha-ha-ha!"

Léa rose to her full height in her autumn dress of sombre green, handsome under her satin hat trimmed with seal-skin, youthful among these old ruins over whom she cast a gentle eye. "Oh, la-la, my dears! Give me a dozen such heart-breaks, if that would help me to lose a couple of pounds!"

"Léa, you're astounding," the old Baroness shot at her in a puff of smoke. "Madame Léa, think of me, please, when you throw away that hat," old Madame Aldonza begged. "Madame Charlotte, you remember your blue one? It lasted me two years. Baroness, when you've quite finished ogling Madame Léa, perhaps you'll be kind enough to deal the cards to me."

"Very well, my sweet, and may they bring you luck!"

Léa stopped for a moment by the door, then stepped out into

the garden. She picked a tea rose, which shed its petals. She listened to the breeze in the birch, to the trams in the Avenue, to the whistle of the local train. The bench she sat on was warm, and she closed her eyes, letting her shoulders enjoy the warmth of the sun. When she opened her eyes again, she hurriedly turned her head in the direction of the house, feeling positive that she was going to see Chéri standing in the garden entrance with his shoulder against the doorway.

‘What can be the matter with me?’ she wondered. Piercing screams of laughter and a little chorus of greeting from indoors brought her, trembling slightly, to her feet. ‘Can I be suffering from nerves?’

‘Ah, here they are, here they are!’ Madame Peloux trumpeted, and the deep bass of the Baroness chimed in ‘Here come the happy pair!’

Léa shivered, ran as far as the door and stopped short: there, in front of her, were old Lili and her adolescent lover, Prince Ceste, just arriving.

Perhaps seventy years of age, with the corpulence of a eunuch held in by stays, old Lili was usually referred to as “passing all bounds,” without these “bounds” being defined. Her round pink painted face was enlivened by a ceaseless girlish gaiety, and her large eyes and small mouth, thin-lipped and shrunken, flirted shamelessly. Old Lili followed the fashion to an outrageous degree. A striking blue-and-white striped skirt held in the lower part of her body, and a little blue jersey gaped over her skinny bosom crinkled like the wattles of a turkey-cock; a silver fox failed to conceal the neck, which was the shape of a flower-pot and the size of a belly. It had engulfed the chin.

‘It’s terrifying,’ Léa thought. She was unable to tear her eyes away from details that were particularly sinister—a white sailor hat, for instance, girlishly perched on the back of a short-cut, strawberry-roan wig; or, again, a pearl necklace visible one moment and the next interred in a deep ravine which once had been termed a “*collier de Vénus*”.

‘Léa, Léa, my little chickabiddy!’ old Lili exclaimed as she did her best to hasten towards Léa. She walked with difficulty on

round swollen feet, tightly swaddled in high-heeled laced boots with paste buckles on the ankle-straps, and was the first to congratulate herself on this performance: "I waddle like a duckling! it is a special little way I have. Guido, my passion, you remember Madame de Lonval? Don't remember her too well or I'll tear your eyes out. . . ."

A slim youth with Italian features, enormous empty eyes and a weak receding chin, kissed Léa's hand hastily and retired into the shadows without a word. Lili caught him in flight, pulled his head down to her scaly chest, calling the onlookers to witness: "Do you know what this is, Madame, do you know what this is? This, ladies, is the love of my life!"

"Restrain yourself, Lili!" Madame de la Berche advised in her masculine voice.

"But why? But why?" from Charlotte Peloux.

"For the sake of decency," said the Baroness.

"Baroness, that's not nice of you! I think they're so sweet. Ah!" she sighed, "they remind me of my own children."

"I was thinking of them," Lili said, with a delighted smile. "It's our honeymoon too, Guido's and mine. Indeed, we've just come to ask about the other young couple! We want to hear all about them."

Madame Peloux became stern. "Lili, you don't expect me to go into details, do you?"

"Oh yes, yes, I do," Lili cried, clapping her hands. She tried to skip, but succeeded only in raising her shoulders and hips a little. "That's always been my besetting sin, and always will be! I adore spicy talk! I'll never be cured of it. That little wretch there knows how I adore it."

The silent youth, called to bear witness, did not open his mouth. The black pupils of his eyes moved up and down against the whites, like frantic insects. Léa watched him, rooted to the spot.

"Madame Charlotte told us all about the wedding ceremony," bleated Madame Aldonza. "The young Madame Peloux was a dream in her wreath of orange-blossom!"

"A madonna! A madonna!" Madame Peloux corrected at the

top of her voice, with a burst of religious fervour. "Never, never, has anyone looked so divine. My son was in heaven! In heaven, I tell you! . . . What a pair they made, what a pair!"

"You hear that, my passion? Orange-blossom!" Lili murmured. "And tell me, Charlotte, what about our mother-in-law, Marie-Laure?"

Madame Peloux's pitiless eyes sparkled: "Oh her! Out of place, absolutely out of place. In tight-fitting black, like an eel wriggling out of the water—you could see everything, breasts, stomach—everything!"

"By Jove!" muttered the Baroness de la Berche with military gusto.

"And that look of contempt she has for everybody, that look of having a dose of cyanide up her sleeve and half a pint of chloroform inside her handbag! As I said, out of place—that exactly describes her. She behaved as if she could only spare us five minutes of her precious time—she'd hardly brushed the kiss off her lips, before she said, 'Au revoir, Edmée, au revoir, Fred,' and off she flew."

Old Lili was breathing hard, sitting on the edge of her chair, her little grandmotherly mouth, with its puckered corners, hanging half open. "And who gave the usual advice?" she threw out.

"What advice?"

"The little talk—oh, my passion, hold my hand while I say it!—instruction for the young bride. Who gave her that?"

Charlotte Peloux took offence and stared at her. "Things may well have been done in that way when you were young, but the practice has fallen into disuse."

The sprightly old girl plumped her fists on her thighs: "Disuse? Disuse or not, how would you know anything about it, my poor Charlotte? There's so little marrying in your family!"

"Ha-ha-ha!" the two toadies imprudently guffawed.

But a single glance from Madame Peloux made them tremble. "Peace, peace, my little angels! You're each enjoying your paradise on earth, so what more do you want?" The Baroness stretched out a strong arm, like a policeman keeping order, between the purple faces of Lili and Madame Peloux. But Char-

lotte scented battle like a war-horse. "If you're looking for trouble, Lili, you don't have to look further than me! Because of your age, I must treat you with respect, and if it weren't for that . . ."

Lili shook with laughter from chin to thigh. "If it weren't for that, you'd get married yourself just to give me the lie? I know—it's not so hard to get married! Why, I'd marry Guido like a shot, if only he were of age!"

"Not possible!" gasped Charlotte, so taken aback that she forgot her anger.

"But, of course . . . Princess Ceste, my dear! *la piccola principessa! Piccola principessa*, that's what my little Prince always calls me!"

She nipped hold of her skirt, and, in turning, displayed a gold curb-chain where her ankle ought to have been. "Only," she continued mysteriously, "his father . . ."

By now out of breath, she made a sign to the silent young man, who took up the tale in a low rapid voice as if he were reciting his piece: "My father, the Duke of Parese, threatens to put me in a convent if I marry Lili."

"In a convent!" Charlotte Peloux squealed. "A man in a convent!"

"A man in a convent!" neighed Madame de la Berche in her deep bass, "Egad! if that isn't exciting!"

"They're barbarians," Aldonza lamented, joining her misshapen hands together.

Léa rose so abruptly that she upset a glass.

"It's uncoloured glass," Madame Peloux observed with satisfaction. "You'll bring good luck to my young couple. Where are you running off to? Is your house on fire?"

Léa managed to squeeze out a sly little laugh: "On fire? In a sense, perhaps. Ssh! no questions! It's a secret."

"What? Already? It's not possible!" Charlotte Peloux cheeped enviously. "I was just saying to myself that you looked as if . . ."

"Yes, yes! You must tell us! Tell us everything," yapped the three old women.

Lili's quilted fists, old Aldonza's deformed stumps, Charlotte

Peloux's hard fingers had seized upon her wrist, her sleeve, her gold-mesh bag. She snatched her arm away from all these claws and succeeded in laughing again, teasingly: "No, it's far too early in the day, it would spoil everything! It's my secret." And she rushed away to the hall.

But the door opened in front of her and a desiccated old fellow, a sort of playful mummy, took her into his arms: "Léa, lovely creature, a kiss for your little Berthelley, or he won't let you pass!"

She gave a cry of fright and impatience, struck off the gloved bones retarding her progress, and fled.

Neither in the avenues of Neuilly, nor on the roads through the Bois, turning to blue in the fast-falling twilight, did she allow herself a moment's reflection. She shivered slightly and pulled up the windows of the motor-car. She felt restored by the sight of her clean house, the comfort of her pink bedroom and boudoir, overcrowded with furniture and flowers.

"Quick, Rose, light the fire in my room!"

"But, Madame, the pipes are already at their winter temperature. Madame should not have gone out with only a fur round her neck. The evenings are treacherous."

"A hot-water bottle in my bed at once, and for dinner a cup of thick chocolate beaten up with the yolk of an egg, some toast, and a bunch of grapes. . . . Hurry, dear, I'm freezing. I caught cold in that junk-shop at Neuilly. . . ."

Once under the sheets, she clenched her teeth to stop them chattering. The warmth of the bed eased her stiffened muscles, but still she did not altogether relax, and she went through the chauffeur's expense book till the chocolate arrived. This she drank at once, frothy and scalding. She chose her *chasselas* grapes one by one, the long greenish-amber bunch dangling by its stem against the light.

Then she turned out the bedside lamp, settled herself in her favourite position, flat on her back, and gave way.

"What can be the matter with me?"

She succumbed again to anxiety and started to shiver. She was

obsessed by the vision of an empty doorway, with clumps of red salvia on either side. 'I can't be well,' she thought, 'one doesn't get into a state like this over a door!' Again she saw the three old women, Lili's neck, and the beige rug that Madame Aldonza had trailed about with her for the past twenty years. 'Which of them am I going to look like in ten years' time?'

Though she did not feel alarmed at this prospect, her anxiety increased still further. She let her mind wander from one incident of her past life to another, from this scene to that, trying to rid her thoughts of the empty doorway framed by red salvia. She was growing restless in her bed and trembled slightly. Suddenly she jumped as though shot, racked by a pain so deep that at first she thought it must be physical, a pain that twisted her lips and dragged from them, in a raucous sob, a single name: "Chéri!"

Tears followed, beyond all control at first. As soon as she had regained her self-control, she sat up, wiped her face, and turned on the lamp again. 'Ah! That's what it is! Now I understand!'

She took a thermometer from the drawer of her bedside table and put it under her arm. 'My temperature's normal, so it's nothing physical. I see. I'm just unhappy. Something must be done about it.'

She drank some water, got out of bed, bathed her inflamed eyes, put on a little powder, poked the fire, and went back to bed. She was on her guard, full of mistrust for an enemy she had never known: grief. She had just said goodbye to thirty years of easy living: years spent pleasantly, intent often on love, sometimes on money. This had left her, at almost fifty, still young and defenceless.

She made fun of herself, ceased to feel her grief, and smiled. 'I think I was out of my mind just now. There's nothing wrong with me any longer.'

But a movement of her left arm, which bent automatically to hold and shelter a sleeping head, brought back all her agony, and she sat up with a jump. "Well, this *is* going to be fun!" she said out loud and sternly.

She looked at the clock and saw that it was barely eleven. Overhead passed the slippered tread of the elderly Rose, on her

way up the stairs to the attic floor. Then there was silence. Léa resisted the impulse to call out for help to this deferential old body. 'Don't give the servants anything to gossip about. We mustn't have that.'

She left her bed again, wrapped herself up warm in a quilted silk dressing-gown and toasted her feet. Then she half opened her window and listened for she knew not what. A moist and milder wind had brought clouds in its wake, and the lingering leaves in the neighbouring Bois sighed with every gust. Léa shut the window again, picked up a newspaper and looked at the date—'October the twenty-sixth. Exactly a month since Chéri was married?' She never said 'Since Edmée was married.'

Following Chéri's example, she did not yet count his young wraith of a wife as really alive. Chestnut-brown eyes, ashy hair which was very lovely with the vestige of a crimp in it—all the rest melted away in her memory like the contours of a face seen in a dream.

'At this very moment, of course, they'll be in each other's arms in Italy. And . . . and I don't mind that in the least.'

She was not boasting. The picture of the young couple she had called up, the familiar attitudes it evoked—even Chéri's face, as he lay exhausted for a minute, with the white line of light between his tired eyelids—aroused in her neither curiosity nor jealousy. On the other hand, an animal convulsion again racked her body, bending her double, as her eye fell on a nick in the pearl-grey wainscot—the mark of some brutality of Chéri's. "The lovely hand which here has left its trace, has turned away from me for ever," she said. 'How grandly I'm talking! Soon grief will be turning me into a poet!'

She walked about, she sat down, she went to bed again and waited for daylight. At eight o'clock Rose found her writing at her desk, and this upset the old lady's-maid.

"Is Madame not well?"

"So-so, Rose. Age, you know. . . . Doctor Vidal thinks I ought to have a change of air. Will you come with me? It promises to be a cold winter here in Paris. We'll go south to the sun, and eat meals cooked in oil."

"Whereabouts will that be?"

"You want to know too much. Simply have my trunks brought down, and give my fur rugs a good beating."

"Madame will be taking the motor-car?"

"I think so. I'm sure of it, in fact. I'll need all my creature comforts now, Rose. Just think of it, this time I'm going all on my own. It's going to be a pleasure trip."

During the next five days Léa rushed all over Paris; wrote, telegraphed, and received telegrams and answers from the south. And she said goodbye to Paris, leaving behind a short letter addressed to Madame Peloux which she started no less than three times:

My dear Charlotte,

You'll forgive me if I go away without saying goodbye to you, and keep my little secret to myself. I'm making a perfect fool of myself . . . and why not? It's a short life, let's make it a gay one.

I send you an affectionate kiss. Remember me to the child when he comes back.

*Your incorrigible
Léa.*

P.S.—Don't trouble to come and interview my butler or concierge; no member of my household knows anything at all about it.

"Do you know, my adored treasure, I don't think you're looking very well."

"It's the night in the train," Chéri answered shortly.

Madame Peloux did not dare to say just what she thought. She found her son changed. 'He's . . . yes, he's sinister!' she decided; and she ended by exclaiming enthusiastically, "It's Italy!"

"If you like," Chéri conceded.

Mother and son had just finished breakfasting together, and Chéri had condescended to praise with an oath his cup of "housemaid's coffee", made with creamy milk, well sugared,

slowly re-heated, with buttered toast crumbled into it and browned till it formed a succulent crust.

He felt cold in his white woollen pyjamas and was clasping his knees to his chest. Charlotte Peloux, anxious to look pretty for her son, had put on a brand new marigold *négligée*, and a boudoir-cap fitting tight across the forehead. This made her face stand out, bare and macabre.

Finding her son's eye fixed upon her, she simpered: "You see, I've adopted the grandmother style. Very soon, I'll powder my hair. Do you like this cap? Rather eighteenth-century, don't you think? Dubarry or Pompadour? How do I look in it?"

"Like an old convict," Chéri said witheringly. "Next time you must run up a warning signal."

She groaned, then shrieked with laughter: "Ha-ha-ha. You've a sharp tongue in your head and no mistake!"

But he did not laugh. He was staring out at the lawn powdered with snow after last night's fall. His nervous state was visible only in the spasmodic twitching of his jaw muscles. Madame Peloux was intimidated. She, too, was silent. The faint tinkle of a bell sounded.

"That's Edmée, ringing for her breakfast," said Madame Peloux.

Chéri did not answer. "What's wrong with the heating? It's freezing in here!" he said a moment later.

"It's Italy!" Madame Peloux repeated lyrically. "You come back here, your eyes and your heart full of the warm sun of the south, and find you've landed at the Pole—at the North Pole. There hasn't been a flower on the dahlias for the last week. But don't worry, my precious! Your love-nest will soon be finished. If the architect hadn't gone down with paratyphoid, it would be ready for you now. I warned him. If I told him once, I told him twenty times: 'Monsieur Savaron . . .'"

Chéri, who was standing by the window, turned round sharply. "What was the date on that letter?"

Madame Peloux opened her large child-like eyes: "What letter?"

"The letter from Léa you showed me."

"She put no date on it, my love; but I got it the night before my last Sunday At Home in October."

"I see. And you don't know who it is?"

"Who what is, my paragon?"

"Whoever it was she went away with, of course."

Malice clothed Madame Peloux's stark features. "No. Would you believe it, nobody has an idea! Old Lili is in Sicily, and none of my set has a clue! A mystery, an enthralling mystery! However, you know me, I've managed to pick up a few scraps here and there . . ."

Chéri's dark eyes expanded: "What's the tattle?"

"It seems it's a young man . . ." Madame Peloux whispered. "A young man not . . . not particularly desirable, if you know what I mean . . . very well made, of course!" She was lying, careful to insinuate the worst.

Chéri shrugged his shoulders.

"Well made, did you say. Don't make me laugh! My poor Léa! I can see him from here—a hefty little fellow from Patron's training-quarters—black hairs on his wrists and clammy hands. . . . Well, I'm going back to bed now; you make me tired."

Trailing his bedroom slippers, he went back to his room, dawdling in the long corridors and on the spacious landings of the house he seemed to be discovering for the first time. He ran into a pot-bellied wardrobe, and was amazed. "Damned if I knew that thing was there. . . . Oh, yes, I vaguely remember. . . . And who the devil's this chap?" He was addressing an enlarged photograph, in a deep black frame, hanging funereally near a piece of coloured pottery, equally unfamiliar to Chéri.

Madame Peloux had been installed in this house for the last twenty-five years, and had kept every unfortunate result of her bad taste and acquisitiveness. "Your house looks just like the nest of a magpie gone batty," was old Lili's reproachful comment. She herself had a hearty appetite for modern pictures, and still more for modern painters. To this Madame Peloux had replied: "I believe in letting well alone."

If the muddy green paint—"The green of hospital corridors," Léa called it—flaked off in one of the passages, Madame Peloux would have it repainted a similar muddy green; or if the maroon velvet on a *chaise-longue* needed replacing, she was careful to choose the same maroon velvet.

Chéri paused by the open door of a dressing-room. Embedded in the dark red marble-topped wash-stand were jug and basin of plain white with a monogram, and over the two electric-light fittings were lily-shaped bead shades. Chéri shuddered as though caught in a violent draught—"Good God, how hideous, what an old junk-shop!"

He hurried away. At the end of the passage, he came upon a window edged with small pieces of red and yellow stained glass. "That's the last straw!" he said grumpily.

He turned to the left and roughly opened a door—the door of his nursery—without knocking. A little cry came from the bed where Edmée was just finishing her breakfast. Chéri closed the door and stared at his wife without going any closer.

"Good morning," she said with a smile. "You do look surprised to see me here!"

She lay bathed in a steady blue light reflected from the snow outside. Her crimped ashy chestnut hair was down, but barely covered her prettily curved shoulders. With her pink-and-white cheeks matching her nightgown, and her rosy lips paler than usual from fatigue, she looked like a light toned picture, not quite finished and rather misty.

"Aren't you going to say good morning to me, Fred?" she insisted.

He sat down close beside his wife and took her in his arms. She fell back gently, dragging him with her. Chéri propped himself on his elbow to look down more closely at her. She was so young that even when tired she still looked fresh. He seemed astonished by the smoothness of her fully rounded lower eyelids, and by the silvery softness of her cheeks.

"How old are you?" he asked suddenly.

Edmée opened her eyes, which she had closed voluptuously.

Chéri stared at the brown of their pupils and at her small square teeth.

"Oh, come! I shall be nineteen on the fifth of January, and do try and remember it."

He drew his arm away roughly and the young woman slipped into the hollow of the bed like a discarded scarf.

"Nineteen, it's prodigious! Do you know that I'm over twenty-five?"

"But of course I know that, Fred. . . ."

He picked up a pale tortoiseshell mirror from the bed-table and gazed at himself. "Twenty-five years old!"

Twenty-five years of age and a face of white marble that seemed indestructible. Twenty-five, but at the outer corners of the eye and beneath it—delicately plagiarising the classical design of the eyelid—were two lines, visible only in full light, two incisions traced by the lightest, the most relentless, of fingers.

He put back the mirror: "You're younger than I am. That shocks me."

"Not me!"

She had answered in a biting voice, full of hidden meaning. He took no notice.

"Do you know why my eyes are beautiful?" he asked in all seriousness.

"No," Edmée said. "Perhaps because I love them?"

"Stuff!" Chéri said, shrugging his shoulders. "It's because they're shaped like a sole."

"Like what?"

"Like a sole."

He sat down near her to give a demonstration.

"Look—here—the corner next the nose is the head of the sole. And then—the upper curve, that's the back of the sole; whereas the lower line runs perfectly straight and that's its belly. And the other corner that tapers up to my temples, that's the sole's tail."

"Oh?"

"Yes, but if I had an eye shaped like a flounder, that's to say,

with the lower part as much curved as the top, then I should look silly. See? You've passed your matric., and you didn't know that?"

"No, I must admit . . ."

She broke off, feeling guilty, because he had spoken sententiously and with exaggerated passion, like someone with a mania. 'There are moments when he looks like a savage,' she thought, 'like a man from the jungle. Yet he knows nothing about plants or animals, and sometimes he doesn't seem even to know about human beings.'

Sitting close beside her, Chéri put one arm round her shoulders and with his free hand began to finger the small, evenly matched, very round and very beautiful, pearls of her necklace. Intoxicated by the scent which Chéri used too much of, she began to droop like a rose in an overheated room.

"Fred! Come back to sleep! We're both tired. . . ."

He seemed not to have heard. He was staring at the pearls with obsessed anxiety.

"Fred!"

He shivered, leaped to his feet, furiously tore off his pyjamas and jumped naked into bed, seeking the place to rest his head on a shoulder where the delicate collar-bone was still youthfully sharp. The whole of Edmée's body obeyed his will as she opened her arms to him. Chéri closed his eyes and never moved. She took care to remain awake, a little smothered under his weight, and thinking him asleep. But almost at once he turned over away from her with a sudden pitch, imitating the groans of someone fast asleep, and rolled himself up in the sheet at the other side of the bed.

'He always does that,' Edmée noted.

All through the winter, she was to awaken in this square room with its four windows. Bad weather delayed the completion of the new house in the Avenue Henri-Martin—bad weather, and Chéri's whims. He wanted a black bathroom, a Chinese drawing-room, a basement fitted up with a swimming pool and gymnasium. To the architect's objections he would answer: "I don't

care a damn. I pay, I want the work done. To hell with the cost." But every now and again he would cast a ruthless eye over an estimate and proclaim "You can't bamboozle young Peloux." Indeed, he held forth on standardisation, fibro-cement and coloured stucco with unexpected glibness and a memory for exact figures that compelled the contractor's respect.

Rarely did he consult his young wife, although he paraded his authority for her benefit and took pains, when occasion arose, to cover his deficiencies by giving curt commands. She was to find that he possessed an instinctive eye for colour, but had only contempt for beauty of shape and period differences.

"You simply clutter up your head with all that stuff and nonsense, what's your name, yes, you, Edmée. An idea for the smoking-room? All right, here's one: Blue for the walls—a ferocious blue. The carpet purple—a purple that plays second fiddle to the blue of the walls. Against that you needn't be afraid of using as much black as you like and a splash of gold in the furniture and ornaments."

"Yes, you're right, Fred. But it will be rather drastic with all those strong colours. It's going to look rather charmless without a lighter note somewhere . . . a white vase or a statue."

"Nonsense," he interrupted, rather sharply. "The white vase you want will be me—me, stark naked. And we mustn't forget a cushion or some thingumabob in pumpkin-red for when I'm running about stark naked in the smoking-room."

Secretly attracted and at the same time disgusted, she cherished these fanciful ideas for turning their future home into a sort of disreputable palace, a temple to the greater glory of her husband. She offered little resistance, just gently requested "some little corner" for a small and precious set of furniture upholstered with needlework on a white ground—a present from Marie-Laure.

This gentleness masked a determination that was young yet far from inexperienced; it stood her in good stead during the four months of camping out in her mother-in-law's house. It enabled her to evade, throughout these four months, the enemy stalking her, the traps laid daily to destroy her equanimity, her

still susceptible gaiety, and her tact. Charlotte Peloux, over-excited at the proximity of so tender a victim, was inclined to lose her head and squander her barbs, using her claws indiscriminately.

"Keep calm, Madame Peloux," Chéri would throw out from time to time. "What bones will there be left for you to pick next winter, if I don't stop you now?"

Edmée raised frightened, grateful eyes to her husband, and did her best not to think too much, not to look too much at Madame Peloux. Then one evening, Charlotte, almost heedlessly, three times tossed across the chrysanthemum table-piece Léa's name instead of Edmée's.

Chéri lowered his satanic eyebrows: "Madame Peloux, I believe your memory is giving way. Perhaps a rest-cure is indicated?"

Charlotte Peloux held her tongue for a whole week, but Edmée never dared to ask her husband: "Did you get angry on my behalf? Was it me you were defending? Or was it that other woman, the one before me?"

Life as a child and then as a girl had taught her patience, hope, silence; and given her a prisoner's proficiency in handling these virtues as weapons. The fair Marie-Laure had never scolded her daughter: she had merely punished her. Never a hard word, never a tender one. Utter loneliness, then a boarding-school, then again loneliness in the holidays and frequent relegations to a bedroom. Finally, the threat of marriage—any marriage—from the moment that the eye of a too beautiful mother had discerned in the daughter the dawn of a rival beauty, shy, timid, looking a victim of tyranny, and all the more touching for that. In comparison with this inhuman gold-and-ivory mother, Charlotte Peloux and her spontaneous malice seemed a bed of roses.

"Are you frightened of my respected parent?" Chéri asked her one evening.

Edmée smiled and pouted to show her indifference: "Frightened? No. You aren't frightened when a door slams, though it may make you jump. It's a snake creeping under it that's frightening."

"A terrific snake, Marie-Laure, isn't she?"

"Terrific."

He waited for confidences that did not come and put a brotherly arm round his wife's slender shoulders: "We're sort of orphans, you and I, aren't we?"

"Yes, we're orphans, and we're so sweet!"

She clung to him. They were alone in the big sitting-room, for Madame Peloux was upstairs concocting, as Chéri put it, her poisons for the following day. The night was cold and the window panes reflected the lamp-light and furnishings like a pond. Edmée felt warm and protected, safe in the arms of this unknown man. She lifted her head and gave a cry of alarm. He was staring up at the chandelier above them with a look of desperation on his magnificent features, and two tears hung glistening between the lids of his half-closed eyes.

"Chéri, Chéri, what's the matter with you?" On the spur of the moment she had called him by the too endearing nickname she had never meant to pronounce. He answered its appeal in bewilderment and turned his eyes down to look at her.

"Chéri, oh God! I'm frightened. What's wrong with you?"

He pushed her away a little, and held her facing him.

"Oh! Oh! You poor child, you poor little thing! What are you frightened of?"

He gazed at her with his eyes of velvet, wide-open, peaceful, inscrutable, all the more handsome for his tears. Edmée was about to beg him not to speak, when he said, "How silly we are! It's the idea that we're orphans. It's idiotic. It's so true."

He resumed his air of comic self-importance, and she drew a breath of relief, knowing that he would say no more. He began switching off all the lights with his usual care, and then turned to Edmée with a vanity that was either very simple or very deceitful: "Well, why shouldn't I have a heart like everybody else?"

"What are you doing there?"

He had called out to her almost in a whisper, yet the sound of Chéri's voice struck Edmée so forcibly that she swayed forward as if he had pushed her. She was standing beside a big open

writing-desk and she spread her hands over the papers scattered in front of her.

"I'm tidying up . . ." she said in a dazed voice. She lifted a hand and it remained poised in mid-air as though benumbed. Then she appeared to wake up, and stopped lying.

"It's like this, Fred. You told me that when we came to move house you'd hate to be bothered over what you'd want to take with you, all the things in this room . . . the furniture. I honestly wanted to tidy, to sort things. Then the poison, temptation came . . . evil thoughts . . . one evil thought. . . . I implore your forgiveness. I've touched things that don't belong to me. . . ."

She trembled bravely and waited.

He stood with his forehead jutting forward, his hands clenched in a threatening attitude; but he did not seem to see his wife. His eyes were strangely veiled, and ever after she was to retain the impression of having spoken with a man whose eyes were deathly pale.

"Ah, yes," he said at length. "You were looking . . . you were looking for love-letters." She did not deny it. "You were hunting for my love-letters."

He laughed his awkward, constrained laugh.

Edmée felt hurt, and blushed. "Of course you must think me a fool. As if you were the kind of man not to lock them away in a safe place or burn them! And then, anyhow, they're none of my business. I've only got what I deserved. You won't hold it too much against me, Fred?"

Her pleading had cost her a certain effort, and she tried deliberately to make herself look appealing, pouting her lips a little and keeping the upper half of her face shadowed by her fluffy hair. But Chéri did not relax his attitude, and she noticed for the first time that the unblemished skin of his cheeks had taken on the transparenence of a white rose in winter, and that their oval contour had shrunk.

"Love-letters," he repeated. "That's howlingly funny."

He took a step forward, seized a fistful of papers and scattered them: post-cards, restaurant bills, tradespeople's announcements,

telegrams from chorus girls met one night and never seen again, *pneumatiques* of four or five lines from sponging friends; and several close-written pages slashed with the sabre-like script of Madame Peloux.

Chéri turned round again to his wife: "I have no love-letters."

"Oh!" she protested. "Why do you want . . ."

"I have none," he interrupted; "you can never understand. I've never noticed it myself until now. I can't have any love-letters because——" He checked himself. "But wait, wait. . . . Yes, there was one occasion, I remember, when I didn't want to go to La Bourboule, and it . . . Wait, wait."

He began pulling out drawers and feverishly tossing papers to the floor.

"That's too bad! What can I have done with it? I could have sworn it was in the upper left-hand . . . No. . . ."

He slammed back the empty drawers and glowered at Edmée.

"You found nothing? You didn't take a letter which began 'But what do you expect, I'm not in the least bored. There's nothing better than to be separated one week in every month,' and then went on to something else. I don't remember what, something about honeysuckle climbing high enough to look in at the window."

He broke off, simply because his memory refused to come to his aid, and he was left gesticulating in his impatience.

Slim and recalcitrant, Edmée did not quail before him. She took refuge in caustic irritability. "No, no, I *took* nothing. Since when have I been capable of *taking* things? But if this letter is so very precious to you, how is it you've left it lying about? I've no need to enquire whether it was one of Léa's?"

He winced, but not quite in the manner Edmée had expected. The ghost of a smile hovered over his handsome, unresponsive features; and, with his head on one side, an expectant look in his eyes, and the delicious bow of his mouth taut-stretched, he might well have been listening to the echo of a name.

The full force of Edmée's young and ill-disciplined emotions burst forth in a series of sobs and tears, and her fingers writhed and twisted as if ready to scratch. "Go away! I hate you! You've

never loved me. I might not so much as exist, for all the notice you take of me! You hurt me, you despise me, you're insulting, you're, you're . . . You think only of that old woman! It's not natural, it's degenerate, it's . . . You don't love me! Why, oh why, did you ever marry me? . . . You're . . . you're . . ."

She was tossing her head like an animal caught by the neck, and as she leaned back to take a deep breath, because she was suffocating, the light fell on her string of small, milky, evenly matched pearls. Chéri stared in stupefaction at the uncontrolled movements of the lovely throat, at the hands clasped together in appeal, and above all at the tears, her tears. . . . He had never seen such a torrent of tears. For who had ever wept in front of him, or wept because of him? No one. Madame Peloux? 'But,' he thought, 'Madame Peloux's tears don't count.' Léa? No. Searching his memory, he appealed to a pair of honest blue eyes; but they had sparkled with pleasure only, or malice, or a rather mocking tenderness. Such floods of tears poured down the cheeks of this writhing young woman. What could be done about all these tears? He did not know. All the same, he stretched out an arm, and as Edmée drew back, fearing some brutality perhaps, he placed his beautiful, gentle, scented hand on her head and patted her ruffled hair. He did his best to copy the tone and speech of a voice whose power he knew so well: "There, there. . . . What's it all about? What's the matter, then? There . . . there. . . ."

Edmée collapsed suddenly, fell back huddled in a heap on a settee, and broke out into frenzied and passionate sobbing that sounded like yells of laughter or howls of joy. As she lay doubled up, her graceful body heaved and rocked with grief, jealousy, fury and an unsuspected servility. And yet, like a wrestler in the heat of a struggle, or a swimmer in the hollow of a wave, she felt bathed in some strange new atmosphere, both natural and harsh.

She had a good long cry, and recovered by slow degrees, with periods of calm shaken by great shudders and gasps for breath. Chéri sat down by her side and continued to stroke her hair. The crisis of his own emotion was over, and he felt bored. He

ran his eyes over Edmée as she lay sideways upon the unyielding settee. This straggling body, with its rucked-up frock and trailing scarf, added to the disorder of the room; and this displeased him.

Soft as was his sigh of boredom, she heard it and sat up. "Yes," she said, "I'm more than you can stand. . . . Oh! it would be better to . . ."

He interrupted her, fearing a torrent of words: "It's not that. It's simply that I don't know what you want."

"What I want? How d'you mean, what I . . ."

She lifted her face, still wet with tears.

"Now listen to me." He took her hands.

She tried to free herself. "No, no, I know that tone of voice. You're going to treat me to another of those nonsensical outbursts. When you put on that tone of voice and face, I know you're going to prove that your eye is shaped like a striped super-mullet, or that your mouth looks like the figure three on its side. No, no, I can't stand that!"

Her recriminations were childish, and Chéri relaxed, feeling that after all they were both very young. He pressed her warm hands between his own.

"But you must listen to me! . . . Good God! I'd like to know what you've got to reproach me with! Do I ever go out in the evenings without you? No! Do I often leave you on your own during the day? Do I carry on a secret correspondence?"

"I don't know—I don't think so——"

He turned her this way and that like a doll.

"Do I have a separate room? Don't I make love to you well?"

She hesitated, smiling with exquisite suspicion. "Do you call that love, Fred?"

"There are other words for it, but you wouldn't appreciate them."

"What you call love . . . isn't it possible that it may be, really, a . . . kind . . . of alibi?" She hastened to add, "I'm merely generalising, Fred, of course . . . I said '*may be*', in certain cases. . . ."

He dropped Edmée's hands. "That," he said coldly, "is putting your foot right in it."

"Why?" she asked in a feeble voice.

He whistled, chin in air, as he moved back a step or two. Then he advanced upon his wife, looking her up and down as if she were a stranger. To instil fear a fierce animal has no need to leap. Edmée noticed that his nostrils were dilating and that the tip of his nose was white.

"Ugh!" he breathed, looking at his wife. He shrugged his shoulders, turned, and walked away. At the end of the room he turned round and came back again. "Ugh!" he repeated, "Look what's talking!"

"What are you saying?"

"Look what's talking, and what it says. Upon my word, it actually has the cheek to . . ."

She jumped up in a rage. "Fred," she said, "don't dare to speak to me again in that tone? What do you take me for?"

"For a woman who knows exactly how to put her foot in it, as I've just had the honour of informing you."

He touched her on the shoulder with a rigid forefinger, and this hurt her as much as if he had inflicted a serious bruise. "You've matriculated; isn't there somewhere some kind of a proverb which says, 'Never play with knives or daggers' or whatever it may be?"

"Cold steel," she answered automatically.

"That's right. Well, my child, you must never play with cold steel. That's to say, you must never be wounding about a man's . . . a man's favours, if I may so express it. You were wounding about the gifts, about the favours, I bestow on you."

"You . . . you talk like a cocotte," she gasped.

She blushed, and her strength and self-control deserted her. She hated him for remaining cool and collected, for keeping his superiority: its whole secret lay in the carriage of his head, the sureness of his stance, the poise of his arms and shoulders.

The hard forefinger once more pressed into Edmée's shoulder.

"Excuse me, excuse me . . . It'll probably come as a great surprise when I state that, on the contrary, it's you who have the

mentality of a tart. When it comes to judging such matters, there's no greater authority than young Peloux. I'm a connoisseur of 'cocottes', as you call them. I know them inside out. A 'cocotte' is a lady who generally manages to receive more than she gives. Do you hear what I say?"

What she heard above all was that he was now addressing her like a stray acquaintance.

"Nineteen years old, white skin, hair that smells of vanilla; and then, in bed, closed eyes and limp arms. That's all very pretty, but is there anything unusual about it? Do you really think it so very unusual?"

She had started at each word, and each sting had goaded her towards the duel of female *versus* male.

"It may be very unusual," she said in a steady voice, "how could *you* know?"

He did not answer, and she hastened to take advantage of a hit. "Personally, I saw much handsomer men than you when we were in Italy. The streets were full of them. My nineteen years are worth those of any other girl of my age, just as one good-looking man is as good as the next. Don't worry, everything can be arranged. Nowadays, marriage is not an important undertaking. Instead of allowing silly scenes to make us bitter . . ."

He put a stop to what she had to say by an almost pitying shake of the head.

"My poor kid, it's not so simple as that."

"Why not? There's such a thing as quick divorce, if one's ready to pay."

She spoke in the peremptory manner of a runaway schoolgirl, and it was pathetic. She had pushed back the hair off her forehead, and her anxious, intelligent eyes were made to look all the darker by the soft contours of her cheeks now fringed with hair: the eyes of an unhappy woman, eyes mature and definitive in a still undeveloped face.

"That wouldn't help at all," Chéri said.

"Because?"

"Because . . ." He leaned forward with his eyelashes tapered into pointed wings, shut his eyes and opened them again as if he had just swallowed a bitter pill. "Because you love me."

She noticed that he had resumed the more familiar form of addressing her, and above all the fuller, rather choked tones of their happiest hours. In her heart of hearts she acquiesced: 'It's true, I love him. At the moment, there's no remedy.'

The dinner bell sounded in the garden—a bell which was too small, dating from before Madame Peloux's time, a sad clear bell reminiscent of a country orphanage. Edmée shivered. "Oh, I don't like that bell. . . ."

"No?" said Chéri, absent-mindedly.

"In our house, dinner will be announced. There'll be no bell. There'll be no boarding-house habits in our home—you'll see."

She spoke these words without turning round, while walking down the hospital-green corridor, and so did not see, behind her, either the fierce attention Chéri paid to her last words, or his silent laughter.

He was walking along with a light step, stimulated by the rather spring, perceptible in the moist gusty wind and the exciting earthy smells of squares and private gardens. Every now and again a fleeting glimpse in a glass would remind him that he was wearing a becoming felt hat, pulled down over the right eye, a loose-fitting spring coat, large light-coloured gloves and a terracotta tie. The eyes of women followed his progress with silent homage, the more candid among them bestowing that passing stupefaction which can be neither feigned nor hidden. But Chéri never looked at women in the street. He had just come from his house in the Avenue Henri-Martin, having left various orders with the upholsterers: orders contradicting one another, but thrown out in a tone of authority.

On reaching the end of the Avenue, he took a deep breath of the good spring scents carried up from the Bois on the heavy moist wing of the west wind, and then hurried on his way to the Porte Dauphine. Within a few minutes he had reached the lower end of the Avenue Bugeaud, and there he stopped. For the first

time in six months his feet were treading the familiar road. He unbuttoned his coat.

'I've been walking too fast,' he said to himself. He started off again, then paused and, this time, trained his eyes on one particular spot: fifty yards or so down the road: bareheaded, shammy-leather in hand, Ernest the concierge—Léa's concierge—was "doing" the brasswork of the railings in front of Léa's house. Chéri began to hum, realised from the sound of his voice that he never did hum, and stopped.

"How are things, Ernest? Hard at work as usual?"

The concierge brightened respectfully.

"Monsieur Peloux! It's a pleasure to see Monsieur again. Monsieur has not changed at all."

"Neither have you, Ernest. Madame is well, I hope?"

He turned his head away to gaze up at the closed shutters on the first floor.

"I expect so, Monsieur, all we've had has been a few post-cards."

"Where from? Was it Biarritz?"

"I don't think so, Monsieur."

"Where is Madame?"

"It wouldn't be easy for me to tell you, Monsieur. We forward all letters addressed to Madame—and there's none to speak of—to Madame's solicitor."

Chéri pulled out his note-case, and cocked an eye at Ernest.

"Oh, Monsieur Peloux, money between you and me? Don't think of it. A thousand francs won't make a man tell what he doesn't know. But if Monsieur would like the address of Madame's solicitor?"

"No thanks, there's no point. And when does she return?"

Ernest threw up his hands: "That's another question that's beyond me. Maybe to-morrow, maybe in a month's time. . . . I keep everything in readiness, just the same. You have to watch out where Madame is concerned. If you said to me now, 'There she comes round the corner of the Avenue,' I shouldn't be surprised."

Chéri turned round and looked towards the corner of the Avenue.

"That's all Monsieur Peloux wants? Monsieur just happened to be walking by? It's a lovely day. . . ."

"Nothing else, thank you, Ernest. Good-bye, Ernest."

"Always at Monsieur's service."

Chéri walked up as far as the Place Victor-Hugo, swinging his cane as he went. Twice he stumbled and almost fell, like people who imagine their progress is being followed by hostile eyes. On reaching the balustraded entrance to the Métro, he leaned over the ramp to peer down into the pink-and-black recesses of the Underground, and felt utterly exhausted. When he straightened his back, he saw that the lamps had been lighted in the square and that the blue of dusk coloured everything around him.

'No, it can't be true. I'm ill.'

He had plumbed the depths of cavernous memories and his return to the living world was painful. The right words came to him at last. 'Pull yourself together, Peloux, for God's sake! Are you losing your head, my boy? Don't you know it's time to go back home?'

This last word recalled a sight that one hour had sufficed to banish from his mind: a large square room—his own nursery; an anxious young woman standing by the window; and Charlotte Peloux, subdued by a Martini.

"Oh, no," he said aloud. "Not that! That's all over."

He signalled to a taxi with his raised stick.

"To the . . . er . . . to the Restaurant du Dragon Blue."

Chéri crossed the grill-room to the sound of violins in the glare of the atrocious electric light, and this had a tonic effect. He shook the hand of a maître d'hôtel who recognised him. Before him rose the stooping figure of a tall young man. Chéri gave an affectionate gasp. "Desmond, the very man I wanted to see! Howdydo?"

They were shown to a table decorated with pink carnations. A small hand and a towering aigrette beckoned towards Chéri from a neighbouring table.

"It's La Loupiote," Vicomte Desmond warned him.

Chéri had no recollection of La Loupiote, but he smiled towards the towering aigrette and, without getting up, touched the small hand with a paper fan lying on his table. Then he put on his most solemn "conquering hero" look, and swept his eyes over an unknown couple. The woman had forgotten to eat since he had sat down in her vicinity.

"The man with her looks a regular cuckold, doesn't he?"

He had leaned over to whisper into his friend's ear, and his eyes shone with pleasure as if with rising tears.

"What d'you drink, now you're married?" Desmond asked, "Camomile tea?"

"Pommery," Chéri said.

"And before the Pommery?"

"Pommery, before and after." And, dilating his nostrils, he sniffed as he remembered some sparkling, rose-scented old champagne of 1889 that Léa kept for him alone.

He ordered a meal that a shop-girl out on the spree might choose—cold fish *au porto*, a roast bird, and a piping hot soufflé which concealed in its innards a red ice, sharp on the tongue.

"Hello!" La Loupiote shouted, waving a pink carnation at Chéri.

"Hello," Chéri answered, raising his glass.

The chimes of an English wall-clock struck eight. "Blast!" Chéri grumbled, "Desmond, go and make a telephone call for me."

Desmond's pale eyes were hungry for revelations to come.

"Go and ask for Wagram 17-08, tell them to put you through to my mother, and say we're dining together."

"And supposing young Madame Peloux comes to the telephone?"

"Say the same thing. I'm not tied to her apron-strings. I've got her well trained."

He ate and drank a lot, taking the greatest care to appear serious and blasé; but his pleasure was enhanced by the least sound of laughter, the clink of glasses, or the strains of a syrupy valse. The steely blue of the highly glazed woodwork reminded

him of the Riviera, at the hour when the too blue sea grows dark around the blurred reflection of the noonday sun. He forgot that very handsome young men ought to pretend indifference; he began to scrutinise the dark girl opposite, so that she trembled all over under his expert gaze.

"What about Léa?" Desmond asked suddenly.

Chéri did not jump: he was thinking of Léa. "Léa? She's in the South."

"Is all over between you?"

Chéri put his thumb in the armhole of his waistcoat.

"Well, of course, what d'you expect? We parted in proper style, the best of friends. It couldn't last a lifetime. What a charming, intelligent woman, old man! But then, you know her yourself! Broadminded . . . most remarkable. My dear fellow, I confess that if it hadn't been for the question of age . . . But there *was* the question of age, and you agree . . ."

"Of course," Desmond interrupted.

This young man with lack-lustre eyes, though he knew just how to perform the wearing and difficult duties of a parasite, had just yielded to curiosity and blamed himself for such rashness. Chéri, circumspect and at the same time highly elated, never stopped talking about Léa. He made all the right remarks, showed all the sound sense of a married man. He spoke in praise of marriage, while giving Léa's virtues their due. He extolled the submissive sweetness of his young wife, and thus found occasion to criticise Léa's independence of character. "Oh, the old devil, she had her own ideas about everything, I can tell you!"

He went a step further in his confidences, speaking of Léa with severity, and even impertinence. He was sheltering behind idiotic words, prompted by the suspicions of a deceived lover, and at the same time enjoying the subtle pleasure of being able to speak of her without danger. A little more, and he would have sullied her name, while his heart was rejoicing in his own memories of her: sullied the soft sweet name which he had been unable to mention freely during the last six months, and the whole gracious vision he had of Léa, leaning over him with her

two or three irreparable wrinkles, and her beauty, now lost to him, but—alas—ever present.

About eleven o'clock they rose to go, chilled by the emptiness of the almost deserted restaurant. However, at the next table, La Loupiote was busy writing letters and had called for telegraph-forms. She raised her white, inoffensive, sheep-like head as the two friends passed by. "Well, aren't you even going to say good evening?"

"Good evening," Chéri condescended to say.

La Loupiote drew her friend's attention to Chéri's good looks. "Would you believe it! And to think that he's got such pots of money. Some people have everything!"

But when Chéri merely offered her an open cigarette-case, she became vituperative. "They have everything, except the knowledge of how to make proper use of it. Go back home to your mother, dearie!"

"Look here," Chéri said to Desmond when they were outside in the narrow street, "look here, I was about to ask you, Desmond . . . Wait till we get away from this beastly crowd. . . ."

The soft damp evening air had kept people lingering in the streets, but the theatre-goers from the Rue Caumartin onwards had not yet packed the Boulevard. Chéri took his friend by the arm: "Look here, Desmond . . . I wanted you to make another telephone call."

Desmond stopped, "Again?"

"You'll ask for Wagram . . ."

"17-08."

"You're marvellous . . . Say that I've been taken ill in your flat. Where are you living?"

"Hôtel Morris."

"Splendid—and that I won't be back till morning, and that you're making me some mint tea. Go on, old man. Here, you can give this to the telephone-girl, or else keep it yourself. But come back quickly. I'll be sitting waiting for you outside Weber's."

The tall young man, arrogant and serviceable, went off crumpling the franc-notes in his pocket, without permitting himself a comment. When Desmond rejoined him, Chéri was slouched over an untouched orangeade in which he appeared to be reading his fortune.

"Desmond . . . Who answered you?"

"A lady," the laconic messenger replied.

"Which?"

"Dunno."

"What did she say?"

"That it was all right."

"In what tone of voice?"

"Same as I'm speaking to you in."

"Oh, good. Thanks."

'It was Edmée,' thought Chéri.

They were walking towards the Place de la Concorde and Chéri linked arms with Desmond. He did not dare to admit that he was feeling dog-tired.

"Where do you want to go?" Desmond asked.

"Well, old man," Chéri sighed in gratitude, "to the Morris; and as soon as we can. I'm fagged out."

Desmond forgot to be impassive. "What? It can't be true. To the Morris? What d'you want to do? No nonsense! D'you want to . . ."

"To go to bed," Chéri answered. And he closed his eyes as though on the point of dropping off, then opened them again. "Sleep, I want to sleep, got it?"

He gripped his friend's arm too hard.

"Let's go there, then," Desmond said.

Within ten minutes they were at the Morris. The sky-blue and white bedroom and the imitation Empire furniture of the sitting-room smiled at Chéri like old friends. He took a bath, borrowed one of Desmond's silk night-shirts which was too tight for him, got into bed, and, wedged between two huge soft pillows, sank into dreamless bliss, into the dark depths of a sleep that protected him from all attacks.

He began to count the shameful days as they went by. "Sixteen . . . seventeen . . . When three weeks are up, I'll go back to Neuilly." He did not go back. Though he saw the situation quite clearly, he no longer had the strength to cure it. At night, and in the morning sometimes, he flattered himself that he would get over his cowardice within an hour or two. "No strength left? . . . Please, please, I beg of you . . . Not yet strength enough. But it's coming back. What's the betting I'll be in the Boulevard d'Inkermann dining-room at the stroke of twelve? One, two . . ." The stroke of twelve found him in the bath, or else driving his motor, with Desmond at his side.

At every mealtime, he felt optimistic for a moment about his marriage. This feeling was as regular as a recurrent fever. As he sat down facing Desmond at their bachelor table, the ghost of Edmée would appear, and plunge him into silent thoughts of his young wife's inconceivable deference. "Really, that young thing's too sweet! Did you ever see such a dream of a wife? Never a word, never a complaint! I'll treat her to one of those bracelets when I get back. . . . Upbringing, that's what does it! Give me Marie-Laure every time for bringing up a daughter!" But one day in the grill-room at the Morris, abject terror was written on his face when he caught sight of a green dress with a chinchilla collar just like one of Edmée's dresses.

Desmond found life wonderful and was getting a little fat. He reserved his arrogance for moments when Chéri—encouraged by him to pay a visit to some "prodigious English girl, riddled with vice", or to some "Indian potentate in his opium palace"—refused point blank or else consented with unconcealed scorn. Desmond had long since despaired of understanding Chéri's ways; but Chéri was paying—and better than during the best of their bachelor days together. They ran across the blonde La Loupiote a second time, when they visited a friend of hers, a woman who boasted such an ordinary name that nobody ever remembered it; "What's-her-name . . . you know perfectly well . . . that pal of La Loupiote's."

The Pal smoked opium, and gave it to others. The instant

you came into her modest, ground-floor flat, you smelt escaping gas and stale drugs. She won the hearts of her guests by a tearful cordiality and by a constant incitement to self-pity—both objectionable traits. She treated Desmond, when he paid her a visit, as “a great big desperately lonesome boy,” . . . and Chéri as “a beauty who has got everything and it only makes him more miserable.” Chéri never touched the pipe; he looked at the small box of cocaine with the repugnance of a cat about to be dosed, and spent most of the night with his back against the cushioned dado, sitting up on a straw mat between Desmond, who went to sleep, and the Pal, who never stopped smoking. For most of the night he breathed in the fumes that satisfy all hunger and thirst, but his self-control and distrust persisted. He appeared to be perfectly happy, except that he stared now and then, with pained and questioning intensity, at the Pal’s withered throat—a skinny, far too red throat, round which shimmered a string of false pearls.

Once, he stretched out a hand and with the tip of his fingers touched the henna-tinted hair on the nape of her neck. He judged the weight of the big light hollow pearls with his hand, then snatched it back with the nervous shiver of someone who catches his finger-nail on a piece of frayed silk. Not long after, he got up and went.

“Aren’t you sick to death of all this,” Desmond asked Chéri, “sick of these poky holes where we eat and drink and never have any girls? Sick of this hotel with the doors always slamming? Sick of the night-clubs where we go in the evenings, and of dashing in that fast car of yours from Paris to Rouen, Paris to Compiègne, Paris to Ville d’Avray? . . . Why not the Riviera for a change? The season down there isn’t December and January, it’s March, April, or . . .”

“No,” said Chéri.

“Then what?”

“Then nothing.”

Chéri affected to become amiable and put on what Léa used to call “his air of worldly superiority”.

"Dear old boy . . . you don't seem to appreciate the beauty of Paris at this time of the year. . . . This . . . er . . . indecisive season, this spring that doesn't seem willing to smile, the softness of the light . . . as opposed to the commonplace Riviera. . . . No, don't you see, I like it here."

Desmond all but lost his lackey patience. "Yes, and besides, it may be that the young Peloux's divorce will . . ."

Chéri's sensitive nostrils blenched. "If you've arranged to touch a commission from some lawyer friend, you can drop the idea at once. There'll be no such thing as 'young Peloux's divorce'."

"My dear fellow! . . ." Desmond protested, doing his best to look hurt, "You have a very curious way of behaving to a man who has been a friend since your childhood, and who has always . . ."

Chéri was not listening. Instead, he pushed towards Desmond's face a pointed chin and a mouth pursed like a miser's. For the first time in his life he had heard a stranger disposing of his possessions.

He began to reflect. Young Peloux's divorce? Many nights and days had he spent in thinking over these words till they had come to spell liberty, a sort of second boyhood, perhaps something even better. But Desmond's voice, with its affected nasal twang, had just called up the image he had been looking for: Edmée, resolute in her little hat with its long motoring veil, moving out of the house at Neuilly on her way to an unknown house to join an unknown man. "Of course, that would settle everything," and his Bohemian side was delighted. At the same time a surprisingly timorous Chéri gibed, "That's not the sort of way one behaves!" The image became focused in sharper colour and movement. Chéri could hear the heavy musical note of the iron gate swinging to, and could see beyond it fingers wearing a grey pearl and a white diamond. "Farewell," the small hand said.

Chéri jumped up, pushing back his seat. "Those are mine, all of them! The woman, the house, the rings . . . they all belong to me!"

He had not spoken out loud, but his features expressed such

savage violence that Desmond thought his last hour of prosperity had struck. Chéri spoke to him pityingly but without kindness.

"Poor pussy-cat, did I scare you? What it is to be descended from the Crusaders! Come along, and I'll buy you pants as fine as my shirts, and shirts as fine as your pants. Desmond, is to-day the seventeenth?"

"Yes, why?"

"The seventeenth of March. In other words, spring. Desmond, people who think themselves smart, I mean those in the height of fashion, women or men—can they afford to wait any longer before buying their spring wardrobes?"

"Hardly——"

"The seventeenth, Desmond! Come along at once; everything's all right. We're going to buy a huge bracelet for my wife, an enormous cigarette-holder for Madame Peloux, and a tiny tie-pin for you."

On more than one such occasion he had felt an overwhelming presentiment that Léa was on the point of returning; that she was already back in her house; that the first-floor shutters had been opened, allowing a glimpse of the flowered pink net curtains across the windows, the lace of the full-length curtains at each side and the glint of the looking-glasses. . . . The fifteenth of April went by and still there was no sign of Léa.

The mournful monotony of Chéri's existence was tempered by several provoking incidents. There was a visit from Madame Peloux, who thought she was breathing her last when she found Chéri looking as thin as a greyhound, eyes wandering and mouth tight shut. There was the letter from Edmée: a letter all in the same surprising tone, explaining that she would stay on at Neuilly "until further orders," and had undertaken to pass on to Chéri "Madame de la Berche's best regards." . . . He thought she was laughing at him, did not know what to answer, and ended by throwing away the enigmatic screed; but he did not go to Neuilly.

April advanced, leafy, cold, bright, and scenting all Paris with tulips, bunches of hyacinths, paulownias and laburnums like dropping-wells of gold. Chéri buried himself all the deeper in austere seculsion. The harassed, ill-treated, angry but well-paid

Vicomte Desmond was given his orders: now to protect Chéri from familiar young women and indiscreet young men; now to recruit both sections and form a troop, who ate, drank, and rushed screaming at the top of their voices between Montmartre, the restaurants in the Bois, and the cabarets on the left bank.

One night the Pal was alone in her room, smoking opium and bewailing some shocking disloyalty of La Loupiote's, when the door opened to reveal the young man, with satanic eyebrows tapering towards his temples. He begged for "a glass of really cold water" to allay some secret ardour that had parched his beautiful lips. He showed not the slightest interest in the Pal and the woes she poured out. She pushed towards him the lacquer tray with its pipe: he would accept nothing, and took up his usual position on the mat, to share with her the semi-obscurity in silence. There he stayed till dawn, moving as little as possible, like a man who fears that the least gesture may bring back his pain. At dawn, he questioned the Pal: "Why weren't you wearing your pearls to-day; you know, the big ones?" and politely took his leave.

Walking alone at night was becoming an unconscious habit with him. With rapid lengthy strides he would make off towards some positive but inaccessible goal. Soon after midnight he would escape from Desmond, who discovered him again only towards daybreak, asleep on his hotel bed, flat on his stomach, his head pillowed on his folded arms, in the posture of a fretful child.

"Oh, good, he's here all right," Desmond would say with relief. "One can never be sure with such a crackpot."

One night, when out on a tramp, his eyes wide open in the darkness, Chéri had felt compelled to walk up the Avenue Bugeaud; for during the day he had disregarded the superstition that made him return there once every twenty-four hours. There are maniacs who cannot go to sleep without having first touched the door-knob three times; a similar obsession made him run his hand along the railings, then put his first finger to the bell-push, and call out *Hullo!* under his breath, as if in fun, before making off in haste.

But one night, that very night, as he stood before the railings, his heart pumped almost into his mouth: there, in the court, the electric globe shone like a mauve moon above the front door steps, the back-door stood wide open shedding a glow on the paved courtyard, while, on the first floor, the bedroom lights filtered through the shutters to make a golden comb. Chéri supported himself against the nearest tree and lowered his head.

"It can't be true. As soon as I look up, it will all be dark again."

He straightened up at the sound of a voice. Ernest, the concierge, was shouting in the passage: "At nine to-morrow, Marcel will help me carry up the big black trunk, Madame."

Chéri turned round in a flash and ran as far as the Avenue du Bois. There he sat down. In front of his eyes danced the image of the electric globe he had been staring at—a dark purple ball fringed with gold, against a black group of trees in bud. He pressed his hand to his heart, and took a deep breath. Early lilac blossom scented the night air. He threw his hat away, undid the buttons of his overcoat and, leaning back on a seat, let himself go, his legs outstretched and his hands hanging feebly by his sides. A crushing yet delicious weight had just fallen upon him. "Ah!" he whispered, "so this is what they call happiness. I never knew."

For a moment he gave way to self-pity and self-contempt. How many good things had he missed by leading such a pointless life—a young man with lots of money and little heart! Then he stopped thinking for a moment, or possibly for an hour. Next, he persuaded himself there was nothing in the world he wanted, not even to go and see Léa.

When he found himself shivering in the cold, and heard the blackbirds carolling the dawn, he got up and, stumbling a little but light-hearted, set off towards the Hôtel Morris without passing through the Avenue Bugeaud. He stretched himself, filled his lungs with the morning air, and overflowed with goodwill to all.

"Now," he sighed, the devil driven out of him, "now . . . Oh now you'll see just how nice to the girl I shall be."

Shaved, shod and impatient—he had been up since eight—Chéri shook Desmond. Sleep gave him a swollen look, livid and quite frightful, like a drowned man. “Desmond! Hey, Desmond! Up you get. . . . You look too hideous when you’re asleep!”

The sleeper woke, sat up, and turned towards Chéri eyes the colour of clouded water. He pretended to be fuddled with sleep so that he could make a long and close examination of Chéri—Chéri dressed in blue, pathetic, superb, and pale under the lightest coat of powder.

There were still moments when Desmond felt painfully aware of the contrast between his ugly mask and Chéri’s good looks. He pretended to give a long yawn. ‘What’s he up to now?’ he wondered; ‘The idiot is in far better looks than yesterday—especially his eyelashes, and what eyelashes he has . . .’ He was staring at the lustrous sweep of Chéri’s thick lashes and the shadow they shed on the dark pupils and bluish whites of his eyes. Desmond noticed also that, this morning, the contemptuously arched lips were moist and fresh, and that he was breathing through them as if he had just that moment finished making love.

Quickly he relegated his jealousy to the back of his mind—where he kept his personal feelings—and asked Chéri in tones of weary condescension: “May one enquire whether you are going out at this hour of the morning, or just coming in?”

“I’m going out,” Chéri said. “Don’t worry about me. I’m off shopping. I’m going to the florist’s, the jeweller’s, to my mother’s, to my wife’s, to . . .”

“Don’t forget the Papal Nuncio!”

“I know what’s what,” Chéri answered. “He shall have some imitation gold studs and a sheaf of orchids.”

It was rare for Chéri to respond to jokes: he usually accepted them in stony silence. His facetious reply proved that he was pleased with himself, and revealed this unaccustomed mood to Desmond. He studied Chéri’s reflection in the looking-glass, noted the pallor of his dilated nostrils, observed that his eyes were continually on the rove, and ventured to put the most discreet of questions.

"Will you be coming back for luncheon? . . . Hey, Chéri, I'm speaking to you. Are we lunching together?"

Chéri answered by shaking his head. He whistled softly, arranging himself in front of the pier-glass so that it framed his figure exactly like the one between the two windows in Léa's room—the one which would soon frame in its heavy gold, against a sunny pink background, the reflection of his body—naked or loosely draped in silk—the magnificent picture of a young man, handsome, loved, happy, and pampered, playing with the rings and necklaces of his mistress. 'Perhaps her young man's reflection is already there, in Léa's looking-glass!' This sudden thought cut so fiercely into his exhilaration that it dazed him, and he fancied he had heard it actually spoken.

"What did you say?" he asked Desmond.

"I never said a word," his well-trained friend said stiffly. "It must have been someone talking outside in the courtyard."

Chéri went out, slamming the door behind him, and returned to his own rooms. They were filled with the dim continual hubbub of the fully awakened Rue de Rivoli, and Chéri, through the open window, could see the spring foliage, the leaves stiff and transparent like thin jade knives against the sun. He closed the window and sat down on a useless little chair which stood against the wall in a dingy corner between his bed and the bathroom door.

"How can it be? . . ." he began in a low voice, and then said no more. He did not understand why it was, that during the last six and a half months he had hardly given a thought to Léa's lover. "*I'm making a perfect fool of myself*," were the actual words of the letter so piously preserved by Charlotte Peloux.

'A perfect fool?' Chéri shook his head. 'It's funny, but that's not how I see her at all. What sort of a man can she be in love with? Somebody like Patron—rather than like Desmond, of course. An oily little Argentine? Maybe. Yet all the same . . .' He smiled a simple smile. 'Apart from me, who is there she could possibly care for?'

A cloud passed over the sun and the room darkened. Chéri leaned his head against the wall. 'My Nounoune . . . My Nou-

noune . . . Have you betrayed me? Are you beastly enough to deceive me? . . . Have you really done that?

He tried to give a sharper edge to his suffering by a misuse of his imagination: the words and sights it presented left him more astonished than enraged. He did his best to evoke the elation of early morning delights when he was living with Léa, the solace of the prolonged and perfect silences of certain afternoons, with Léa—the delicious sleepy hours in winter spent in a warm bed in a freshly aired room, with Léa . . . ; but, all the time, in the suffused cherry-coloured afternoon light aflame behind the curtains of Léa's room, he saw in Léa's arms one lover and one lover only—Chéri. He jumped up, revived by a spontaneous act of faith. 'It's as simple as that! If I'm unable to see anyone but myself beside her, then it's because there is no one else to see.'

He seized the telephone, and was on the point of ringing her up, when he gently replaced the receiver. "No nonsense. . . ."

He walked out into the street, erect, with shoulders squared. He went in his open motor to the jeweller's, where he became sentimental over a slender little bandeau of burning blue sapphires invisibly mounted on blue steel, "so exactly right for Edmée's hair," and took it away with him. He bought some stupid, rather pompous flowers. As it had only just struck eleven, he frittered away a further half-hour, drawing money from the Bank, turning over English illustrated papers at a kiosk, visiting his scent-shop and a tobacconist's that specialised in Oriental cigarettes. Finally, he got back into his motor, and sat down between his sheaf of flowers and a heap of little beribboned parcels.

"Home."

The chauffeur swivelled round on his basket-seat.

"Monsieur? . . . What did Monsieur say? . . ."

"I said Home—Boulevard d'Inkermann. D'you require a map of Paris?"

The motor went full speed towards the Champs-Élysées. The chauffeur drove much faster than usual and his thoughts could almost be read in his back. He seemed to be brooding uneasily over the gulf which divided the flabby young man of the past months—with his "As you like," and his "Have a glass of some-

thing, Antonin?"—from young Monsieur Peloux, strict with the staff and mindful of the petrol.

"Young Monsieur Peloux" leaned back against the morocco leather, hat on knees, drinking in the breeze and exerting all his energy in an effort not to think. Like a coward, he closed his eyes between the Avenue Malakoff and the Porte Dauphine to avoid a passing glimpse of the Avenue Bugeaud, and he congratulated himself on his resolution.

The chauffeur sounded his horn in the Boulevard d'Inkermann for the gate to be opened, and it sang on its hinges with a heavy musical note. The capped concierge hurried about his business, the watch-dogs barked in recognition of their returning master. Very much at his ease, sniffing the green smell of the newly mown lawns, Chéri entered the house and with a master's step climbed the stairs to the young woman whom he had left behind three months before, much as a sailor from Europe leaves behind, on the other side of the world, a little savage bride.

Léa sat at her bureau, throwing away photographs from the last trunk to be unpacked. "Heavens, how hideous people are! The women who had the nerve to give me these! And they think I'm going to put them up in a row on the mantelpiece—in plated frames or little folding-cases. Tear them all up quick, and straight into the waste-paper basket!"

She picked up the photographs again and, before throwing them away, subjected each to the closest scrutiny of which her blue eyes were capable. A postcard with a dark background of a powerful lady encased in full-length stays, doing her best to veil her hair and the lower part of her face with a wisp of tulle, in the teeth of a strong sea-breeze. "*To dearest Léa, in memory of exquisite hours spent at Guéthary. Anita.*" Another photograph, stuck on the middle of a piece of cardboard with a surface like dried mud, portrayed a large and lugubrious family. They might have been a penal colony, with a dumpy, heavily-painted grandmother in charge. Holding above her head a tambourine tricked out with favours, she was resting one foot on the bent knee of

what looked like a robust and crafty young butcher-boy. "That should never have seen the light of day," Léa said decisively, crumpling the rough-cast cardboard.

She smoothed out an unmounted print, to disclose two old provincial spinsters. An eccentric, loud-voiced and aggressive couple, they were to be found every morning on a bench somewhere along a promenade, and every evening between a glass of cassis and their needlework-frames, on which they were embroidering black pussy-cats, fat toads, or a spider. "*To our beautiful fairy! From her little friends at Le Trayas, Miquette and Riquette.*"

Léa destroyed these souvenirs of her travels—and brushed a hand across her forehead. "It's horrible. And there'll be dozens and dozens more after these, just as there were dozens before them, all much the same. There's nothing to be done about it. It's life. Maybe wherever a Léa is to be found, there at once spring from the earth a myriad creatures like Charlotte Peloux, de la Berche, and Aldonza, or old horrors who were once handsome young men, people who are . . . well, who are impossible, impossible, impossible. . . ."

She heard, so fresh was her memory, voices that had called out to her from the top of hotel steps or hailed her with a "Hoo-hoo" from afar, across golden sands, and she lowered her head in anger like a bull.

She had returned, after an absence of six months, thinner, more flabby, less serene. Now and again a nervous twitch of the jaw jerked her chin down against her neck, and careless henna-shampooing had left too orange a glint in her hair; but her skin had been tanned to amber by sea and wind. This gave her the glowing complexion of a handsome farmer's wife, and she might have done without rouge. All the same, she would have to arrange something carefully round her neck, not to say cover it up completely; for it had shrunk and was encircled with wrinkles that had been inaccessible to sunburn.

Still seated, she dawdled over tidying away her various odds and ends, and her eyes began to glance round the room, as if

some chair were missing. But what she was looking for was her old energy, the old anxiety to see at once that everything was as it should be in her comfortable home.

"Oh! That trip!" she sighed. "How could I? How exhausting it all is!"

She frowned, once again with that irritable jerk of her chin, when she noticed the broken glass of a little picture by Chaplin which she thought perfectly lovely—the head of a young girl, all silver and rose.

"And I could put both hands through that tear in the lace curtains. . . . And that's only the beginning. . . . What a fool I was to stay away so long! And all in *his* honour! As if I couldn't just as well have nursed my grief here, in peace and comfort!"

She rose, disgruntled, and, gathering up the flounces of her tea-gown, went over to ring the bell, saying to herself, "Get along with you, you old baggage!"

Her maid entered, under a heap of underclothes and silk stockings.

"Eleven o'clock, Rose. And my face hasn't been done yet. I'm late."

"There's nothing to be late for. There aren't any old maids now to drag Madame off on excursions, or turn up at crack of dawn to pick every rose in the place. There's no Monsieur Roland to drive Madame mad by throwing pebbles through her window. . . ."

"Rose, there's only too much to keep us busy in the house. The proverb may well be true that three moves are as bad as a fire, but I'm quite convinced that being away from home for six months is as bad as a flood. I suppose you've noticed the hole in the curtain?"

"That's nothing. . . . Madame has not yet seen the linen-room: mouse-droppings everywhere and holes nibbled in the floor. And it's a funny thing that I left Émérancie with twenty-eight glass-cloths and I come back to find twenty-two."

"No!"

"It's the truth—every word I say, Madame."

They looked at each other, sharing the same indignation, both

of them deeply attached to this comfortable house, muffled in carpets and silks, with its well-stocked cupboards and its shiny white basement. Léa gave her knee a determined slap.

"We'll soon change all that, my friend. If Ernest and Émérance don't want their week's notice, they'll manage to find those six glass-cloths. And did you write to Marcel, and tell that great donkey which day to come back?"

"He's here, Madame."

Léa dressed quickly, then opened the window and leaned out, gazing complacently at her avenue of trees in bud. No more of those fawning old maids, and no more of Monsieur Roland—the athletic young heavyweight at Cambo. . . . "The idiot," she sighed.

She forgave this passing acquaintance his silliness, and blamed him only for having failed to please her. In her memory—that of a healthy woman with a forgetful body—Monsieur Roland was now only a powerful animal, slightly ridiculous and, when it came to the point, so very clumsy. Léa would now have denied that, one rainy evening when the showers were falling in fragrance on the rose-geraniums, a flood of blinding tears had served to blot out Monsieur Roland behind the image of Chéri.

This brief encounter had left Léa unembarrassed and unregretful. In the villa she had taken at Cambo, the "idiot" and his frolicking old mother would have been made just as welcome as before. They could have gone on enjoying the well-arranged meals, the rocking-chairs on the wooden balcony, all the creature comforts that Léa dispensed with such justifiable pride. But the idiot had felt sore and gone away, leaving Léa to the attentions of a stiff, handsome officer, greying at the temples, who aspired to marriage with "Madame de Lonval".

"Our years, our fortunes, the taste we both have for independence and society, doesn't everything show that we were destined for each other?" murmured the colonel, who still kept his slim waist.

She laughed, and enjoyed the company of this dry, dapper man, who ate well and knew how to hold his liquor. He mistook her feelings and he read into the lovely blue eyes, and the trust-

ful, lingering smiles of his hostess, the acceptance he was expecting. The end of their dawning friendship was marked by a decisive gesture on her part: one she regretted in her heart of hearts and for which she was honest enough to accept the blame. 'It's my own fault. One should never treat a Colonel Ypoustègue, descendant of an ancient Basque family, as one would treat a Monsieur Roland. I've never given anyone such a snub. All the same, it would have been gentlemanly, and intelligent too, if he had come back as usual the next day in his dog-cart, to smoke his cigar, meet the two old girls and pull their legs.'

She failed to understand that a middle-aged man could accept his dismissal, but not certain glances—glances appraising his physique, comparing him in that respect so unmistakably with another, unknown and invisible. Léa, caught in his sudden kiss, had subjected him to the searching, formidable gaze of a woman who knows exactly where to find the tell-tale marks of age. From the dry, well cared-for hands, ribbed with veins and tendons, her glance rose to the pouched chin and furrowed brows, returning cruelly to the mouth entrapped between double lines of inverted commas. Whereupon all the aristocratic refinement of the "Baroness de Lonval" collapsed in an "Oh, la la," so insulting, so explicit, so common, that the handsome figure of Colonel Ypoustègue passed through her door for the last time.

'The last of my idylls,' Léa was thinking, as she leaned out over her window-ledge. But the weather over Paris was fine, her echoing courtyard was dapper, with its trim bay trees rising ball-shaped in green tubs, and from the room behind her a breath of scented warmth came playing over the nape of her neck: all this gradually helped her to recover her good humour, and her sense of mischief. She watched the silhouettes of women passing on their way down to the Bois. 'So skirts are changing again,' Léa observed, 'and hats are higher.' She planned sessions with her dressmaker, others with her milliner; the sudden desire to look beautiful made her straighten her back. 'Beautiful? For whom? Why, for myself, of course. And then to aggravate old Ma Peloux!'

Léa had heard about Chéri's flight, but knew no more than that. While disapproving of Madame Peloux's private-detective methods, she did not scruple to listen to a young *vendeuse*, who would show her gratitude for all Léa's kindnesses by pouring gossip in her ear at a fitting, or else by sending it to her, with "a thousand thanks for the delicious chocolates" on a huge sheet of paper embossed with the letter-head of her establishment. A postcard from Lili, forwarded to Léa at Cambo—a postcard scribbled by the dotty old harridan in a trembling hand without commas or full stops—had recounted an incomprehensible story of love and flight and a young wife kept under lock and key at Neuilly.

'It was weather like this,' Léa recalled, 'the morning I read Lili's postcard in my bath at Cambo.'

She could see the yellow bathroom, the sunlight dancing on the water and ceiling. She could hear the thin-walled villa re-echoing with a great peal of laughter—her own laughter, rather ferocious and none too spontaneous—then the cries that followed it: "Rose! Rose!"

Breasts and shoulders out of water, dripping, robust, one magnificent arm outstretched, looking more than ever like a naiad on a fountain, she had waved the card with the tips of her wet fingers. "Rose, Rose! Chéri . . . Monsieur Peloux has done a bunk! He's left his wife!"

"That doesn't surprise me, Madame," Rose had said. "The divorce will be gayer than the wedding, when the dead seemed to be burying the dead."

All through that day Léa had given way to unseemly mirth. "Oh! that fiendish boy. Oh! the naughty child! Just think of it!"

And she shook her head, laughing softly to herself, like a mother whose son has stayed out all night for the first time.

A bright varnished park-paeton flashed past her gates, sparkled behind its prancing high-steppers and vanished almost without a sound on its rubber wheels.

'There goes Spéleïeff,' Léa observed; 'he's a good sort. And there goes Merguillier on his piebald: eleven o'clock. It won't be

long before that dried-up old Berthelley passes on his way to thaw out his bones on the Sentier de la Vertu. Curious how people can go on doing the same thing day after day! I could almost believe I'd never left Paris, except that Chéri isn't here. My poor Chéri! He's finished with, for the present. Night-life, women, eating at any hour, drinking too much. It's a pity. He might have turned into a decent sort, perhaps, if he'd only had pink chaps like a pork-butcher and flat feet. . . .'

She left the window, rubbing her numbed elbows, and shrugged her shoulders. 'Chéri could be saved once, but not a second time.' She polished her nails, breathed on a tarnished ring, peered closely at the disastrous red of her hair and its greying roots, and jotted down a few notes on a pad. She did everything at high speed and with less composure than usual, trying to ward off an attack of her old insidious anxiety. Familiar as this was, she denied its connection with her grief and called it "her moral indigestion". She began wanting first one thing, then suddenly another—a well-sprung victoria with a quiet horse appropriate to a dowager; then a very fast motor-car; then a suite of Directoire furniture. She even thought of doing her hair differently; for twenty years she had worn it high, brushed straight off the neck. 'Rolled curls low on the neck, like Lavallière? Then I should be able to cope with this year's loose-waisted dresses. With a strict diet, in fact, and my hair properly hennaed, I can hope for ten—no, let's say five years more of . . .'

With an effort she recovered her good sense, her pride, her lucidity. 'A woman like me would never have the courage to call a halt? Nonsense, my beauty, we've had a good run for our money.' She surveyed the tall figure, erect, hands on hips, smiling at her from the looking-glass. She was still Léa.

'Surely a woman like that doesn't end up in the arms of an old man? A woman like that, who's had the luck never to soil her hands or her mouth on a withered stick! Yes, there she stands, the "vampire", who needs must feed off youthful flesh.'

She conjured up the chance acquaintances and lovers of her early days: always she had escaped elderly lechers; so she felt

pure, and proud of thirty years devoted to radiant youths and fragile adolescents.

'And this youthful flesh of theirs certainly owes me a great debt. How many of them have me to thank for their good health, their good looks, the harmlessness of their sorrows! And then their egg-nogs when they suffered from colds, and the habit of making love unselfishly and always refreshingly! Shall I now, merely to fill my bed, provide myself with an old gentleman of . . . of . . . ?' She hunted about and finished up with majestic forgetfulness of her own age, 'An old gentleman of forty?'

She rubbed her long shapely hands together and turned away in disgust. 'Pooh! Farewell to all that! It's much prettier. Let's go out and buy playing-cards, good wine, bridge-scorers, knitting-needles—all the paraphernalia to fill a gaping void, all that's required to disguise that monster, an old woman.'

In place of knitting-needles, she bought a number of dresses, and *négligées* like the gossamer clouds of dawn. A Chinese pedicure came once a week, the manicurist twice, the *masseuse* every day. Léa was to be seen at plays, and before the theatre at restaurants where she never thought of going in Chéri's time.

She allowed young women and their friends—as well as Kühn, her former tailor, now retired—to ask her to their box or to their table. But the young women treated her with a deference she did not appreciate; and when Kühn, at their first supper together, called her "my dear friend," she retorted: "Kühn, I assure you it doesn't suit you at all to be a customer."

She sought refuge with Patron, now a referee and boxing promoter. But Patron was married to a young person who ran a bar, a little creature as fierce and jealous as a terrier. To join the susceptible athlete, Léa went as far out as the Place d'Italie, at considerable risk to her dark sapphire-blue dress, heavy with gold embroidery, to her birds of paradise, her impressive jewels, and her new rich red-tinted coiffure. She had had enough after one sniff of the sweat, vinegar and turpentine exuded by Patron's "white hopes", and she left, deciding never to venture again inside that long low gas-hissing hall.

An unaccountable weariness followed her every attempt to get back into the bustling life of people with nothing to do.

‘What can be the matter with me?’

She rubbed her ankles, a little swollen by evening, looked at her strong teeth, and gums that had hardly begun to recede; and thumped her strong ribs and healthy stomach as if sounding a cask. Yet some undefinable weight, now that the chock had been knocked from under her, was shifting within her, and dragging her down. It was the Baroness de la Berche—met by chance in a “public bar” where she was washing down two dozen snails with cabbies’ white wine—who in the end informed her of the prodigal’s return to the fold, and of the dawn of a crescent honeymoon in the Boulevard d’Inkermann. Léa listened calmly to this Moral Tale; but she turned pale with emotion the following day when she recognised the blue limousine outside her gates and saw Charlotte Peloux on her way to the house.

“At last, at last! Here you are again, Léa, my beauty! . . . Lovelier than ever! Thinner than last year! Take care, Léa, we mustn’t get too thin at our age! So far, and no further! And yet . . . But what a treat it is to see you!”

Never had that bitter tongue sounded so sweet to Léa. She let Madame Peloux prattle on, thankful for the breathing-space afforded by this acid stream. She had settled Charlotte Peloux into a deep armchair, in the soft light of the little pink-panelled salon, as in the old days. Automatically she had herself taken the straight-backed chair, which forced her to lift her shoulders and keep up her chin, as in the old days. Between them stood the table covered by a cloth of heavy embroidery, and on it, as in the old days, the large cut-glass decanter half full of old brandy, the shimmering petal-thin goblets, iced water, and short-bread biscuits.

“My beauty, now we’ll be able to see each other again in peace, in peace. You know my motto: ‘When in trouble, shun your friends: let them only share your luck!’ All the time Chéri was playing truant, I purposely didn’t show you any sign of life, you understand. Now that all’s well and my children are happy

again, I shout it aloud, I throw myself into your arms, and we start our pleasant existence all over again. . . .” She broke off and lit a cigarette, as clever with her pauses as an actress, “. . . without Chéri, of course.”

“Of course,” Léa acquiesced with a smile.

She was watching and listening to her old enemy in satisfied astonishment. The huge inhuman eyes, the chattering lips, the restless, tight little body—all that was facing her across the table had come simply to test her powers of resistance, to humiliate her, as in the old days, always as in the old days. But, as in the old days, Léa knew when to answer, when to be scornful, when to smile, and when to retaliate. Already that sorry burden, which had weighed so heavily the day before and the days before that, was beginning slowly to lift. The light seemed normal once more, and familiar, as it played over the curtains and suffused the little drawing-room.

‘Here we are again,’ Léa thought, in lighter vein. ‘Two women, both a little older than a year ago, the same habits of backbiting and the same stock phrases; good-natured wariness at meals shared together; the financial papers in the morning, scandal-mongering in the afternoon: all this will have to be taken up again, since it’s Life, my life. The Aldonzas and the de la Berches, the Lilis and a few homeless old gentlemen: the whole lot squeezed round a card table, with the packs jostling the brandy-glasses, and perhaps, thrown in, a pair of little woollen shoes, begun for a baby who’s soon to be born. . . . We’ll start all over again, since it is ordained. Let’s enter on it cheerfully. After all, it’s only too easy to sink back into the grooves of the old life.’

And she settled back, eyes bright and mouth relaxed, to listen to Charlotte Peloux, who was greedily expatiating upon her daughter-in-law.

“My Léa, you should know, if anyone, that what I’ve always longed for is peace and quiet. Well now, I’ve got them. Chéri’s escapade, you see, was nothing more than sowing a few wild oats. Far be it from me to reproach you, Léa dear, but as you’ll

be the first to admit, from eighteen to twenty-five he really never had the time to lead the life of a bachelor! And now he's done it with a vengeance!"

"It's a very good thing that he did," Léa said, without the flicker of a smile; "it acts as a sort of guarantee to his wife for the future."

"The very word, the very word I was hunting for!" barked Madame Peloux, beaming. "A guarantee! And ever since that day—one long dream! And, you know, when a Peloux does come home again after being properly out on the spree, he never goes off again!"

"Is that a family tradition?" Léa asked.

But Charlotte took no notice.

"And what's more, he was very well received when he did return home. His little wife—ah, there's a little wife for you, Léa!—and I've seen a fair number of little wives in my time, you know, and I don't mind telling you I've never seen one to hold a candle to Edmée!"

"Her mother is so remarkable," Léa said.

"Think, just think, my beauty—Chéri left her on my hands for very nearly three months! and between you and me she was very lucky to have me there."

"That's exactly what I was thinking," Léa said.

"And then, my dear, never a word of complaint, never a scene, never a tactless word! Nothing, nothing! She was patience itself, and sweetness . . . and the face of a saint, a saint!"

"It's terrifying," Léa said.

"And then, what d'you suppose happened when our young rascal walked in one morning, all smiles, as though he'd just come in from a stroll in the Bois? D'you suppose she allowed herself a single comment? Not one. Far from it. Nothing. As for him, though at heart he must have felt just a little ashamed . . ."

"Oh, why?" Léa asked.

"Well, really! After all . . . He was welcomed with open arms, and the whole thing was put right in their bedroom—in two ticks—just like that—no time lost! Oh, I can assure you, for

the next hour or so there wasn't a happier woman in the world than me."

"Except, perhaps, Edmée," Léa suggested.

But Madame Peloux was all exaltation, and executed a superb soaring movement with her little arms: "I don't know what you can be thinking of. Personally, I was only thinking of the happy hearth and home."

She changed her tune, screwed up her eyes and pouted: "Besides, I can't see that little girl frantic with passion, or sobbing with ecstasy. Twenty, and skinny at that. . . . Pah! at that age they stammer and stutter. And then, between ourselves, I think her mother's cold."

"Aren't you being carried away by your sense of family?" Léa said.

Charlotte Peloux expanded her eyes to show their very depths, but absolutely nothing was to be read there.

"Certainly not, certainly not! Heredity, heredity! I'm a firm believer in it. Look at my son, who is fantasy incarnate . . . What? You don't know that he's fantasy incarnate?"

"It must have escaped my memory," Léa apologised.

"Well, I have high hopes for my son's future. He'll love his home as I love mine, he'll look after his fortune, he'll love his children, as I loved him. . . ."

"For goodness' sake, don't paint such a depressing picture," Léa begged. "What's it like, the young people's home?"

"Sinister!" shrieked Madame Peloux. "Positively sinister. Purple carpets. Purple! A black-and-gold bathroom. A salon with no furniture in it, full of Chinese vases larger than me! So, what happens is that they're always at Neuilly. Besides, without being conceited, I must say that girl adores me."

"Her nerves have not been upset at all?" Léa asked, anxiously.

Charlotte Peloux's eyes brightened. "No danger of that! She plays her hand well, and we must face the fact."

"Who d'you mean by 'we'?"

"Forgive me, my beauty, pure habit. We're dealing here with what I call a brain, a real brain. You should see the way she gives orders without raising her voice, and takes Chéri's teasing, and

swallows the bitterest pills as if they were lollipops. . . . I begin to wonder, I really begin to wonder, whether there is not positive danger lying ahead for my son. I'm afraid, Léa dear, I'm afraid she may prove a damper on his originality, on his . . ."

"What? Is he being an obedient little boy?" Léa interrupted. "Do have some more of my brandy, Charlotte, it comes from Spéleïeff and it's seventy-four years old—you could give it to a new-born babe."

"'Obedient' is hardly the right word, but he's . . . imperturbable . . ."

"Imperturbable?"

"That's the word! For instance, when he knew I was coming to see you . . ."

"Did he know, then?"

An impetuous blush leapt to Léa's cheeks, and she cursed her hot blood and the bright daylight of the little drawing-room. Madame Peloux, a benign expression in her eyes, fed on Léa's confusion.

"But of course he knew. That oughtn't to bring a blush to your cheeks, my beauty. What a child you are!"

"In the first place, how did you know I was back?"

"Oh, come, Léa, don't ask such foolish questions. You've been seen about everywhere."

"Yes, but Chéri—did you tell him I was back?"

"No, my beauty, it was he who told me."

"Oh, it was he who . . . That's funny."

She heard her heart beating in her voice and dared not risk more than the shortest answers.

"He even added: 'Madame Peloux, you'll oblige me by going to find out news of Nounoune.' He's still so fond of you, the dear boy."

"How nice!"

Madame Peloux, crimson in the face, seemed to abandon herself to the influence of the old brandy and talked as in a dream, wagging her head from side to side. But her russet eyes remained

fixed and steely, and she kept a close watch on Léa, who was sitting bolt upright, armed against herself, waiting for the next thrust.

"It's nice, but it's quite natural. A man doesn't forget a woman like you, Léa dear. And . . . if you want to know what I really think, you've only to lift a finger and . . ."

Léa put a hand on Charlotte Peloux's arm. "I don't want to know what you really think," she said gently.

The corners of Madame Peloux's mouth fell: "Oh, I can understand, I approve," she sighed in a passionless voice. "When one has made other arrangements for one's life, as you have . . . I haven't even had a word with you about yourself!"

"But it seems to me that you have."

"Happy?"

"Happy."

"Divinely happy? A lovely trip? Is *he* nice? Where's his photo?"

Léa, relieved, sharpened her smile and shook her head. "No, no, you'll find out nothing, search where you will. Have your detectives let you down, Charlotte?"

"I rely on no detectives," Charlotte answered. "It's certainly not because anyone has told me . . . that you'd been through another heart-breaking desertion . . . that you'd been terribly worried, even over money. . . . No, no, you know what small attention I pay to gossip!"

"No one knows it better than me. My dear Lolotte, you can go back home without any fears on my behalf. And please reassure our friends, and tell them that I only wish they had made half what I did out of Oil shares between December and February."

The alcoholic cloud-screen, which softened the features of Madame Peloux, lifted in a trice; a clear, sharp, thoroughly alert face emerged. "You were in on Oil? I might have known it! And you never breathed a word to me."

"You never asked me about it. . . . You were thinking only of your family, as was natural. . . ."

"Fortunately, I was thinking of Compressed Fuel at the same time." The muted trumpet resembled a flute.

"Ah! and you never let on to me either!"

"Intrude upon love's young dream? Never! Léa, my dear, I'm off now, but I'll be back."

"You'll come back on Thursday, because at present, my dear Lolotte, your Sundays at Neuilly . . . they're finished for me. Would you like it if I started having a few people here on Thursdays? Nobody except old friends, old Ma Aldonza, our Reverend-Father-the-Baroness—poker for you, knitting for me. . . ."

"Do you knit?"

"Not yet, but it will soon come. Well?"

"I jump for joy at the idea! See if I'm not jumping! And you may be sure I won't say a word about it at home. That bad boy would be quite capable of coming and asking for a glass of port on one of your Thursdays. Just one more little kiss, my beauty. . . . Heavens, how good you smell. Have you noticed that as the skin gets less firm, the scent sinks in better and lasts much longer? It's really very nice."

'Be off, be off . . .' Quivering, Léa stood watching Madame Peloux as she crossed the courtyard. 'Go on your mischievous way!—Nothing can stop you. You twist your ankle, yes—but it never brings you down. Your chauffeur is careful not to skid, so you'll never crash into a tree. You'll get back safely to Neuilly, and you'll choose your moment—to-day, or to-morrow, or one day next week—to come out with words that should never pass your lips. You'll try and upset those who, perhaps, are happy and at peace. The least harm you'll do is to make them tremble a little, as you made me, for a moment. . . .'

She was trembling at the knees, like a horse after a steep pull, but she was not in pain. She felt overjoyed at having kept so strict a control over herself and her words. Her looks and her colour were enhanced by her recent encounter, and she went on pulp-ing her handkerchief to release her bottled-up energy.

She could not detach her thoughts from Madame Peloux.

'We've come together again,' she said to herself, 'like two dogs over an old slipper which both have got used to chewing. How queer it is! That woman is my enemy, and yet it's from her I now draw my comfort. How close are the ties that bind us!'

Thus, for a long time, she mused over her future, veering between alarm and resignation. Her nerves were relaxed, and she slept for a little. As she sat with one cheek pressed against a cushion, her dreams projected her into her fast-approaching old age. She saw day follow day with clockwork monotony, and herself beside Charlotte Peloux—their spirited rivalry helping the time to pass. In this way she would be spared, for many years, the degrading listlessness of women past their prime, who abandon first their stays, then their hair-dye, and who finally no longer bother about the quality of their underclothes. She had a foretaste of the sinful pleasures of the old—little else than a concealed aggressiveness, day-dreams of murder, and the keen recurrent hope for catastrophes that will spare only one living creature and one corner of the globe. Then she woke up, amazed to find herself in the glow of a pink twilight as roseate as the dawn.

"Ah, Chéri!" she sighed.

But it was no longer the raucous hungry cry of a year ago. She was not now in tears, nor was her body suffering and rebellious, because threatened by some sickness of the soul. Léa rose from her chair, and rubbed her cheek, embossed by the imprint of the embroidered cushion.

'My poor Chéri! It's a strange thought that the two of us—you by losing your worn old mistress, and I by losing my scandalous young lover—have each been deprived of the most honourable possession we had upon this earth!'

Two days went by after the visit of Charlotte Peloux: two grey days that passed slowly for Léa. She faced this new life with the patience of an apprentice. 'Since this is going to be my new life,' she said to herself, 'I'd better make a start.' But she set about it clumsily, altogether too conscientiously, so that it was a

strain on her perseverance. On the second day, about eleven in the morning, she was seized with a desire to go for a walk through the Bois as far as the Lakes.

'I'll buy a dog,' she thought. 'He'll be a companion, and force me to walk.' And Rose had to hunt through the bottom of the summer cupboards for a pair of strong-soled brown boots and a tweed coat and skirt, smelling of alpine meadows and pine forests. Léa set off with the resolute stride proper to the wearer of heavy footwear and rough country clothes.

'Ten years ago, I should not have feared to carry a stick,' she said to herself. When still quite near the house, she heard behind her a brisk light tread, which she thought she recognised. She became unnerved, almost paralysed by a compelling fear; and before she could recover she let herself unwittingly be overtaken, and then passed, by an unknown young man. He was in a hurry, and never even glanced at her.

'I really am a fool,' she breathed in her relief.

She bought a dark carnation to pin on her jacket and started off again. But thirty yards ahead of her, looming out of the diaphanous mist above the grass verges of the Avenue, the silhouette of a man was waiting.

'This time I do recognise the cut of that coat and that way of twirling a cane. . . . Oh, no thank you, the last thing I want is for him to see me shod like a postman and wearing a thick jacket that makes me look stocky. If I must run into him, I'd far rather he saw me in something else . . . and he never could stand me in brown, anyhow. . . . No, no . . . I'm off home. . . . I . . .'

At that moment the waiting man hailed an empty taxi, stepped in, and drove past Léa: he was a young man with fair hair and a small close-clipped moustache. But this time Léa did not smile or feel relief. She turned on her heel and walked back home.

"One of my off-days, Rose. . . . Bring me the peach-blossom tea-gown, the new one, and the big embroidered cloak. I'm stifling in these woollen things."

'It's no good being obstinate,' Léa thought. 'Twice in succession it's turned out not to be Chéri: the third time it would have

been. I know the little jokes Fate plays on one. There's nothing to be done about it. I've no fight left in me to-day, I'm feeling limp.'

She spent the rest of the day once more trying patiently to learn to be alone. After luncheon she enjoyed a cigarette and a look at the papers, and welcomed with a short-lived joy a telephone call from Baroness de la Berche, then another from Spéleïeff, her former lover, the handsome horse-coper, who had seen her in the street the previous evening and offered to sell her a spanking pair.

There followed an hour of complete and frightening silence. 'Come, come . . .' She began to walk up and down, with her hands on her hips, her arms free of the heavy gold rose-embroidered cloak, its magnificent train sweeping the floor behind her.

'Come, come. . . . Let's try to take stock. This isn't the moment to become demoralised—now that I'm no longer in love with the boy. I've been living on my own now for six months. I managed perfectly well when I was in the south. To start with, I moved about from place to place. And the people I got to know on the Riviera or in the Pyrenees did me good; I felt positively refreshed each time any of them went away. Starch poultices may not cure a burn, but they do bring relief when constantly renewed. My six months of keeping on the move reminds me of the story of that hideous Sarah Cohen, who married a monster of ugliness. "Each time I look at him, I think that I am pretty."

'But I knew what it was like to live alone before these last six months. What sort of life did I lead after I'd left Spéleïeff, for instance? Oh yes, I went chasing round bistros and bars with Patron, and then all of a sudden Chéri came into my life. But before Spéleïeff, there was little Lequellec: when his family dragged him away from me to lead him to the altar, his beautiful eyes were brimming with tears, poor boy. . . . After him, I was all alone for four months, I remember. The first month, I cried a great deal. Oh, no, it was for Bacciocchi I cried so much. But when I was through with my tears, there was no holding me. It was so delightful to find myself alone. Yes, but at the Bacciocchi

time I was twenty-eight, and thirty after Lequellec, and in between these two, I had known . . . Well, no matter. After Spéleïeff, I became disgusted—so much money so ill spent. Whereas now, after Chéri, I'm . . . I'm fifty, and I was unwise enough to keep him for six whole years!"

She wrinkled her forehead, and looked ugly with her mouth in a sulky droop.

'It serves me right. At my age, one can't afford to keep a lover six years. Six years! He has ruined all that was left of me. Those six years might have given me two or three quite pleasant little happinesses, instead of one profound regret. A liaison of six years is like following your husband out to the colonies: when you get back again nobody recognises you and you've forgotten how to dress.'

To relieve the strain, she rang for Rose, and together they went through the contents of the little cupboard where she kept her lace. Night fell, set the lamps blossoming into light, and called Rose back to the cares of the house.

'To-morrow,' Léa said to herself, 'I'll order the motor and drive out to Spéleïeff's stud-farm in Normandy. I'll take old La Berche, if she wants to come: it will remind her of the past glories of her own carriages. And, upon my word, should the younger Spéleïeff cast an eye in my direction, I'm not saying I . . .'

She carefully smiled a mysterious and provocative smile, to delude what ghosts there might be hovering round the dressing-table or round the formidable bed, glimmering in the shadows. But she felt entirely frigid, and full of contempt for the pleasures other people found in love.

She dined off grilled sole and pastries, and found the meal a recreation. She chose a dry champagne in place of the Bordeaux, and hummed as she left the table. Eleven o'clock caught her by surprise, still taking the measurements of the space between the windows in her bedroom, where she planned to replace the large looking-glasses with old painted panels of flowers and balustrades. She yawned, scratched her head, and rang for her maid to undress her. While Rose knelt to take off her silk stock-

ings, Léa reviewed her achievements of the day already slipping into the pages of the past, and was as pleased with her performance as if she had polished off an imposition. Protected for the night against the dangers of idleness, she could look forward to so many hours of sleep, so many when she would lie awake. Under cover of night, the restless regain the privilege of yawning aloud or sighing, of cursing the milkman's cart, the street-cleaners, and the early morning sparrows.

During her preparations for the night, she thought over a number of mild projects that would never come into being.

'Aline Mesmacker has a restaurant bar and is simply coining money. . . . Obviously, it gives her something to do, as well as being a good investment. . . . But I can't see myself sitting at a cash-desk; and if one employs a manageress, it's no longer worth while. Dora and that fat Fifi run a night-club together, Mother La Berche told me. Everybody's doing it now. And they wear stiff collars and dinner jackets, to attract a special clientèle. Fat Fifi has three children to bring up—they're her excuse. . . . Then there's Kühn, who's simply kicking his heels, and would gladly take some of my capital to start a new dressmaker's.' Naked, and brick-pink from the reflection of her Pompeian bathroom, she sprayed herself with her favourite sandalwood, and, without thinking about it, enjoyed unfolding a long silk night-gown.

'All that's so much poppycock! I know perfectly well that I dislike working. To bed with you, Madame! You'll never have any other place of business, and all your customers are gone!'

The coloured lining of the white gandoura she put on was suffused with a vague pink. She went back to her dressing-table, and combed and tugged at the hairs stiffened by dye, lifting both her arms, and thus framing her tired face. Her arms were still so beautiful, from the full deep hollow of the armpit up to the rounded wrists, that she sat gazing at them in the looking-glass.

"What lovely handles for so old a vase!"

With a careless gesture she thrust a pale tortoiseshell comb into the back of her hair, and, without much hope, picked a detective story from the shelf of a dark closet. She had no taste

for fine bindings and had never lost the habit of relegating books to the bottom of a cupboard, along with cardboard boxes and empty medicine bottles.

As she stood smoothing the cool linen sheets on her huge uncovered bed, the big bell in the courtyard rang out. The full, solemn, unwonted peal jarred on the midnight hour.

"What in the world . . . ?" she said out loud.

She held her breath while listening, her lips parted. A second peal sounded even louder than the first, and Léa, with an instinctive movement of self-preservation and modesty, ran to powder her face. She was about to ring for Rose when she heard the front door slam, followed by footsteps in the hall and on the stairs, and the sound of two voices mingling—her maid's and someone else's. She had no time to make up her mind: the door of her room was flung open by a ruthless hand. Chéri stood before her—his top-coat unbuttoned over evening clothes, his hat on his head—pale and angry-looking.

He leaned back against the door now shut behind him, and did not move. He looked not so much at Léa as all round the room, with the quick shifting glance of a man about to be attacked.

Léa, who that morning had trembled at the half-surmised outline of a figure in the mist, felt at first only the resentment of a woman caught at her toilet. She drew her wrap more closely about her, settled her comb, and with one foot hunted for a missing slipper. She blushed, yet by the time the high colour died down she had already recovered the semblance of calm. She raised her head and appeared taller than the young man who was leaning, all in black, against the white of the door.

"That's a nice way to come into a room," she said in a rather loud voice. "You might at least take your hat off and say good evening."

"Good evening," Chéri said in surly tones.

The sound of his voice seemed to astonish him. He looked all round less like an angry animal, and a sort of smile drifted from his eyes down to his mouth, as he repeated a gentler "Good evening."

He took off his hat and came forward a few steps.

"May I sit down?"

"If you like," Léa said.

He sat down on a pouffe and saw that she remained standing.

"Are you in the middle of dressing? Aren't you going out?"

She shook her head, sat down far away from him, picked up her nail-buffer and never said a word. He lit a cigarette, and asked her permission only after it was alight.

"If you like," Léa repeated indifferently.

He said nothing more and dropped his gaze. Noticing that his hand with the cigarette in it was shaking, he rested it on the edge of a table. Léa continued polishing her nails deliberately and from time to time cast a brief glance at Chéri's face, especially at his lowered eyelids and the dark fringe of his lashes.

"It was Ernest who opened the front door to me as usual," Chéri said at last.

"And why shouldn't it have been Ernest? Ought I to have changed my staff because you got married?"

"No . . . I mean, I simply said that . . ."

Again silence fell, broken by Léa.

"May I know whether you intend to remain for some time, sitting on that pouffe? I don't even ask why you take the liberty of entering my house at midnight. . . ."

"You may ask me why," he said quickly.

She shook her head. "It doesn't interest me."

He jumped up precipitately, sending the pouffe rolling away behind him, and bore down upon Léa. She felt him bending over her as if he were going to strike her, but she did not flinch. The thought came to her: 'What in this world is there for me to be frightened of?'

"So you don't know what brings me here! You don't want to know what brings me here!"

He tore off his coat and sent it flying on to the chaise-longue, then he crossed his arms, and shouted quite close to Léa's face, in a strained but triumphant voice, "I've come back!"

She was using a delicate pair of tweezers, and these she care-

fully put away before wiping her fingers. Chéri dropped into a chair, as though his strength was completely exhausted.

"Good," Léa said. "You've come back. That's very nice! Whose advice did you take about that?"

"My own," Chéri said.

She got up in her turn, the better to dominate him. Her surging heartbeats had subsided, allowing her to breathe in comfort. She wanted to play her role without a mistake.

"Why didn't you ask me for my advice? I'm an old friend who knows all your clownish ways. Why did it never occur to you that your coming here might well embarrass . . . someone?"

Lowering his head, he searched every corner of the room from under his eyebrows—the closed doors, the bed, metal-girt and heaped with luxurious pillows. He found nothing exceptional, nothing new, and shrugged his shoulders.

Léa expected more than that and drove home her point. "You understand what I mean?"

"Perfectly," he answered. "'Monsieur' has not come in yet? 'Monsieur' is sleeping out?"

"That's none of your business, child," she said calmly.

He bit his lip and nervously knocked off his cigarette ash into a jewel tray.

"Not in that, I keep on telling you!" Léa cried. "How many times must I . . . ?"

She broke off to reproach herself for having unconsciously adopted the tone of their old familiar quarrels. But he did not appear to have heard and went on examining one of Léa's rings—an emerald she had purchased on her recent trip.

"What's . . . what's this?" he stammered.

"That? It's an emerald."

"I'm not blind. What I mean is, who gave it you?"

"No one you know."

"Charming!" Chéri said bitterly.

The note in his voice was enough to restore Léa's authority, and she pressed her advantage, taking pleasure in leading him still further astray.

"Isn't it charming? I get compliments on it wherever I go.

And the setting, you've seen it . . . the filigree of diamonds . . ."

"Enough!" bawled Chéri furiously, smashing his fist down on the fragile table.

A few roses shed their petals at the impact, and a china cup slithered without breaking on to the thick carpet. Léa reached for the telephone, but Chéri caught her hand in a rough grasp. "What are you going to do with that telephone?"

"Call the police," Léa said.

He took hold of both her arms, pretending to be up to some playful nonsense as he pushed her away from the instrument.

"Oh go on with you, that's all right. Don't be silly! Can't I even open my mouth without your getting all melodramatic?"

She sat down and turned her back on him. He remained standing, with nothing in his hands: his parted lips were swollen, giving him the look of a sulky child; one black lock hung down over his eyebrow. Surreptitiously, Léa watched him in a looking-glass, till his reflection vanished when he sat down. In her turn, Léa was embarrassed when she felt him staring at her back, broadened by the loose folds of her gandoura. She returned to her dressing-table, smoothed her hair, rearranged her comb, and, as if for want of something better to do, began unscrewing the top of a scent-bottle. Chéri turned his head as the first whiff reached his nostrils.

"Nounoune!" he called.

She did not answer.

"Nounoune!"

"Beg my pardon," she ordered, without turning round.

"Not likely!" he sneered.

"I can't force you. But you'll leave the house. And at once. . . ."

"I beg your pardon," he said at once, peevishly.

"Better than that."

"I beg your pardon," he repeated, quite low.

"That's better."

She went over to him and ran her hand lightly over his bowed head. "Come, tell me all about it."

He shivered, trembling under her touch. "What do you want me to tell you? It's not very complicated. I've come back, that's all."

"Tell me! Come along, tell me!"

He rocked backwards and forwards on his seat, pressing his hands between his knees, and raised his head towards Léa without meeting her eyes. She watched the quivering of his nostrils, and she heard him trying to control his rapid breathing. She had only to say once more, "Come, tell me all about it," and give him a prod with her finger, as if to push him over. At once he cried out, "Nounoune darling! Nounoune darling!" and threw all his weight upon her, clasping her long legs, so that they gave way under her.

Once seated, she let him slither to the floor and sprawl over her with tears, and inarticulate words, and groping fingers that caught at her lace and her pearls and hunted feverishly under her dress for the shape of her shoulder and under her hair to touch her ears.

"Nounoune darling! We're together again, my Nounoune! Oh, my Nounoune! your shoulder, and your scent, and your pearls, my Nounoune, oh, it's so stunning . . . and that little burnt taste your hair has, oh, it's . . . it's stunning. . . ."

He leaned back to breathe out this silly word with what might have been the last breath of his body: then, still on his knees, he clasped Léa in his arms, offering her a forehead shadowed under tousled hair, a trembling mouth moist with tears, and eyes bright with weeping and happiness. She was so lost in contemplating him, so perfectly oblivious of everything that was not Chéri, that she never thought of kissing him. She twined her arms round his neck and gently hugged him to her, rocking him to the rhythm of murmured words.

"My pet . . . my naughty boy . . . You're here . . . You've come back again. . . . What have you been up to now? You're so naughty . . . my pretty. . . ."

He was moaning softly, keeping his lips together and hardly speaking, as he listened to Léa. He rested his cheek on her breast

and begged her to go on, if for a moment she ceased her tender lullaby. And Léa, fearful that her own tears would flow, went on with her scolding.

"Wicked monster . . . heartless little devil . . . Get along with you, you great slut!"

He looked at her in gratitude: "That's right . . . Go on slanging me! Oh, Nounoune!"

She held him at arm's length to see him properly. "So you love me, then?"

He lowered his eyes in childish confusion: "Yes, Nounoune."

A little burst of uncontrollable laughter warned Léa that she was on the verge of giving way to the most terrible joy of her life. An embrace, followed by collapse, the uncovered bed, two bodies joined together like the two living halves of an animal that has been cut through. 'No, no,' she said to herself, 'not yet. oh, not yet. . . .'

"I'm thirsty," Chéri sighed. "Nounoune, I'm thirsty."

She rose quickly and put a hand on the now tepid jug of water; hardly had she hurried from the room before she was back again. Chéri, curled up in a ball, was lying with his head on the pouffe. "Rose will bring you some lemonade," Léa said. "Don't stay there. Come and sit on the chaise-longue. Does the lamp hurt your eyes?"

She was trembling with delight in her imperious solicitude. She sat down at the other end of the chaise-longue and Chéri half stretched out to nestle against her.

"Perhaps now you'll tell me a little . . ."

They were interrupted by the entry of Rose. Chéri, without getting up, languidly turned his head in her direction: "Evening, Rose."

"Good evening, Monsieur," Rose said, discreetly.

"Rose, to-morrow at nine, I'd like . . ."

"Brioche and chocolate," Rose finished for him.

Chéri shut his eyes again with a sigh of contentment. "And that's that. . . . Rose, where am I going to dress to-morrow morning?"

"In the boudoir," Rose answered accommodatingly. "Only I had better take the settee out, I suppose, and put back the shaving-mirror, as it used to be?"

She sought confirmation in the eye of Léa, who was proudly displaying her spoilt child, supported by her arm as he drank.

"If you like," Léa said. "We'll see. You can go, Rose."

Rose retired, and during the ensuing moment's silence nothing could be heard except the vague murmuring of the wind and the cry of a bird bewildered by the brightness of the moon.

"Chéri, are you asleep?"

He gave one of his long-drawn sighs like an exhausted retriever. "Oh, no, Nounoune, I'm too happy to sleep."

"Tell me, child . . . You haven't been unkind over there?"

"At home? No, Nounoune, far from it. I swear to you."

He looked up at her, without raising his trusting head.

"Of course not, Nounoune. I left because I left. The girl's very nice. There was no fuss at all."

"Ah!"

"I wouldn't swear that she didn't have an inkling all the same. This evening she was wearing what I call her 'orphanage look', you know, pathetic dark eyes under her pretty head of hair. . . . You know how pretty her hair is?"

"Yes."

She threw out these monosyllables in a whisper as if intent on the words of someone talking in his sleep.

"I even think," Chéri continued, "that she must have seen me going through the garden."

"Oh?"

"Yes. She was on the balcony, in her white sequin dress, congealed whiteness. Oh! I don't like that dress. . . . Ever since dinner it had been making me long to cut and run."

"No."

"Yes it had, Nounoune. I can't say whether she saw me. The moon wasn't up. It came up while I was waiting."

"Where were you waiting?"

Chéri waved a vague hand in the direction of the avenue.

"There. I was waiting, don't you understand. I wanted to see. I'd waited a long time."

"But what for?"

He hastily jumped away and sat further off. He resumed his expression of primitive distrust. "I wanted to be sure there was nobody here."

"Oh, yes. . . . You thought that . . ."

She could not resist a scornful laugh. A lover in her house! A lover while Chéri was still living! It was grotesque. 'How stupid he is!' she thought in her enthusiasm.

"You're laughing?"

He stood up in front of her and put his hand on her forehead, forcing back her head. "You're laughing! You're making fun of me. You're . . . Then you have a lover! There is someone!"

He leaned over her as he spoke, pushing her head back against the end of the chaise-longue. She felt the breath of an insulting mouth on her eyelids, and made no effort to be free of the hand that was crushing her hair against her forehead.

"I dare you to say you have a lover!"

She fluttered her eyelids, dazzled by the radiance of the face bearing down on her, and finally, in a toneless voice, she said: "No, I have no lover. I . . . love you. . . ."

He relaxed his hold and began pulling off his dinner jacket and waistcoat; his tie whistled through the air and ended up round the neck of Léa's bust—up on the mantelpiece. Meanwhile, he never moved away from her, and kept her, wedged between his knees, where she sat on the chaise-longue.

When she saw him half-naked, she asked, with a note of sadness: "Do you really want to? . . . Do you? . . ."

He did not answer, carried away by the thought of his approaching pleasure and the consuming desire to take her again. She gave way and served her young lover like a good mistress, with devout solicitude. Nevertheless, she anticipated with a sort of terror the moment of her own undoing; she endured Chéri as she might a torture, warding him off with strengthless hands, and holding him fast between strong knees. Finally, she seized him

by the arm, uttered a feeble cry and foundered in the deep abyss, whence love emerges pale and in silence, regretful of death.

They remained enfolded in their close embrace and no words troubled the prolonged silence of their return to life. The upper part of his body had slipped down and he lay across Léa's thigh, his pendent head, with eyes closed, resting upon the sheets as if he had been stabbed to death over the body of his mistress. She, meanwhile, partly turned away from him, bore almost the full weight of this unsparing body. She breathed softly but unevenly. Her left arm ached, crushed beneath her. Chéri could feel the back of his neck growing numb. Both were waiting, concentrated and motionless, for the abating tempest of the pleasure to recede.

'He's asleep,' Léa thought. With her free hand, she was still clinging to Chéri's wrist and she squeezed it gently. One of her knees was being crushed by a knee—how well she knew its lovely shape! About the level of her own heart she could feel the steady muffled beating of another. Chéri's favourite scent—in-sistent, clinging, reminding her of fat waxy flowers and exotic glades—was all pervasive. 'He is here!' she whispered, immersed in a feeling of blind security. 'He is here for ever!' her senses re-echoed. The well-ordered prudence, the happy common sense that had been her guide through life, the humiliating vagaries of her riper years and the subsequent renunciations, all beat a retreat and vanished into thin air before the presumptuous brutality of love. 'He is here!' she thought. 'He has left his own home and his pretty silly little wife to come back, to come back to me! Who can take him from me now? Now at last I'll be able to organise our existence. He doesn't always know what he wants; but I do. No doubt we shall have to go away. We shan't go into hiding, but we'll look for somewhere peaceful. For I must find time to look at him. When I was unaware I loved him, I can't ever have looked at him properly. I must find a place where there'll be room enough for his whims and my wishes. I'll do the thinking for both of us—let him do the sleeping.'

While she was painstakingly withdrawing her left arm, cramped and pricking with pins and needles, and her numbed shoulder,

she glanced at Chéri's averted face and found that he was not asleep. She could see the whites of his eyes and the flutter of the little black wings of his long eyelashes.

"Why, you're not asleep!"

She felt him tremble against her, before he turned over in a single movement.

"But you're not asleep, either, Nounoune!"

He stretched a hand out to the bedside table and switched on the lamp: a flood of rosy light covered the big bed, throwing the patterns of the lace into high relief, hollowing out shadowed valleys between swelling hills in the quilted folds of the eiderdown. Chéri, stretched out at full length, surveyed the field of his victory and of his peace. Léa, leaning on one elbow beside him, stroked his beloved, long eyebrows, and swept back the rebellious locks. Lying with his hair dishevelled over his forehead, he looked as if he had been blown over by a raging wind.

The enamel clock struck. Chéri straightened himself at a bound and sat up. "What time is it?"

"I don't know. What difference can it make to us?"

"Oh, I just asked. . . ."

He gave a short laugh, and did not immediately lie down again. Outside, the first milkcart clinked out its tinkling carillon, and he made a vague movement in the direction of the avenue. The strawberry-coloured curtains were slit through by the cold blade of dawning day. Chéri turned back to look at Léa, and stared at her with the formidable intensity of a suspicious dog or a puzzled child. An undecipherable thought appeared in the depths of his eyes; their shape, their dark wallflower hue, their harsh or languorous glint, were used only to win love, never to reveal his mind. From sheets crumpled as though by a storm, rose his naked body, broad-shouldered, slim-waisted; and his whole being breathed forth the melancholy of perfect works of art.

"Ah, you . . ." sighed the infatuated Léa.

He did not smile, accustomed as he was to accepting personal praise.

"Tell me, Nounoune. . . ."

"What, my pretty?"

He hesitated, fluttered his eyelids, and shivered. "I'm tired . . . and then to-morrow, how will you manage about——"

Léa gave him a gentle push and pulled the naked body and drowsy head down to the pillows again.

"Don't worry. Lie down and go to sleep. Isn't Nounoune here to look after you? Don't think of anything. Sleep. You're cold, I'm sure. . . . Here, take this, it's warm. . . ."

She rolled him up in the silk and wool of a little feminine garment, retrieved from somewhere in the bed, and put out the light. In the dark, she lent him her shoulder, settled him happily against her side, and listened till his breathing was in rhythm with her own. No desires clouded her mind, but she did not wish for sleep. 'Let him do the sleeping; it's for me to do the thinking,' she repeated to herself. 'I'll contrive our flight with perfect tact and discretion; I believe in causing as little suffering and scandal as possible. . . . For the spring we shall like the south best. If there were only myself to be considered, I'd rather stay here, in peace and quiet; but there's Ma Peloux and the young Madame Peloux. . . .' The vision of a young wife in her night-gown, anxiously standing beside a window, checked Léa only long enough for her to shrug her shoulders with cold impartiality. 'I can't help that. What makes one person's happiness . . .'

The black silky head stirred on her breast, and her sleeping lover moaned in his dream. With a zealous arm, Léa shielded him against nightmares, and rocked him gently so that—without sight, without memory, without plans for the future—he might still resemble that "naughty little boy" never born to her.

He had lain awake for some little while, taking great care not to stir. Cheek on folded arms, he tried to guess the time. Under a clear sky, the avenue must be vibrating with heat too insistent for early morning, since no shadow of a cloud passed across the lambent rose-red curtains. 'Ten o'clock, perhaps?' He was tormented by hunger; he had eaten little the previous evening. A year ago he would have bounded out of bed, roughly aroused Léa from sleep by ferocious shouts for cream-frothed chocolate and butter off the ice.

He did not stir. He was afraid, did he move, of crumbling away what remained to him of his rapture, the visual pleasure he derived from the shining curtains and from the steel and brass spirals of the bed, twinkling in the coloured aura of the room. Last night's great happiness had dwindled, it seemed, had melted, and sought refuge in the dancing iridescence of a cut glass jug.

On the landing, Rose trod the carpet with circumspect step; a discreet besom was sweeping the courtyard; and Chéri heard the tinkle of china coming from the pantry. 'How the morning drags on,' he said to himself. 'I'll get up'. But he remained without moving a muscle, for, behind him, Léa yawned and stretched her legs. He felt the touch of a gentle hand on his back. He shut his eyes again, and, for no good reason, his whole body began to act a lie, feigning the limpness of sleep. He was aware of Léa leaving the bed and of her dark silhouette between him and the curtains, which she drew half apart. She turned round to look at him, and with a toss of the head smiled in his direction—in no sense a smile of triumph, but a resolute smile, ready to accept all dangers. She was in no hurry to leave the room, and Chéri kept watch on her through hardly parted eyelashes. He saw her open a railway time-table and run her finger down the columns; then she seemed absorbed in some calculation, brow puckered and face upturned. Not yet powdered, a meagre twist of hair at the back of her head, double chin and raddled neck, she was exposing herself rashly to the unseen observer.

She moved away from the window, and, taking her cheque-book from a drawer, wrote and tore out several cheques. Then she put a pair of white pyjamas at the foot of the bed, and silently left the room.

Alone, Chéri took several deep breaths, realising that he had hardly dared to breathe since Léa had left the bed. He got up, put on the pyjamas, and opened a window. 'It's stifling in here,' he gasped. He had the vague uncomfortable feeling of having done something reprehensible. 'Because I pretended to be asleep? But I've watched Léa a hundred times just after she's got out of bed. Only, this time, I made the pretence of being asleep.'

The dazzling light restored the rose-pink glow of the room,

and the delicate nacreous tints of the picture by Chaplin smiled down at him from the wall. Chéri bowed his head and shut his eyes, in an effort to remember the room as it had looked the night before—the mysterious colour, like the inside of a water-melon, the enchanted dome of lamp-light, and, above all, his exaltation when reeling under the intensity of his pleasures.

“You’re up! The chocolate’s already on its way.”

He was pleased to note that it had taken Léa only these few moments to do her hair, touch up her face, and spray herself with the familiar scent. The room seemed suddenly to be filled with the cheerful sound of her lovely voice, and with the smell of chocolate and hot toast. Chéri sat down beside the two steaming cups and was handed the thickly buttered toast by Léa. She did not suspect that he was trying to find something to say, for she knew that he was seldom talkative, especially when he was eating. She enjoyed a good breakfast, eating with the haste and preoccupied gaiety of a woman who, her trunks packed, is ready to catch her train.

“Your second piece of toast, Chéri?”

“No, thank you, Nounoune.”

“Not hungry any more?”

“Not hungry.”

With a smile, she shook her finger at him. “You know what you’re in for! You’re going to swallow down two rhubarb pills!”

He wrinkled his nose, shocked. “Listen, Nounoune. You’ve got a mania for fussing . . .”

“Ta ti ta ta! That’s my look out. Put out your tongue. You won’t show it me! Then wipe off your chocolate moustache, and let’s have a quick sensible talk. Tiresome subjects can’t be dealt with too quickly.”

She stretched across the table to take Chéri’s hand and hold it between her own.

“You’ve come back. That was our fate. Do you trust yourself to me? I’ll be responsible for you.”

She could not help breaking off, and closed her eyes as if hugging her victory. Chéri noticed the flush on his mistress’s face.

"Oh!" she continued in a lower voice, "When I think of all that I never gave you, all that I never said to you! When I think that I believed you merely a passing fancy, like all the others—only a little more precious than all the others! What a fool I was not to understand that you were my love, *the* love, the great love that comes only once!"

When she opened her blue eyes, they seemed to have become bluer, gaining depth in the shade of her eyelids, and her breathing was uneven.

'Oh,' Chéri prayed inwardly, 'Don't let her ask me a question, don't let her expect an answer from me now! I couldn't speak a single word.'

She gave his hand a little shake. "Come along, let's be serious. As I was saying—we're leaving, we've already left. What will you do about *over there*? Let Charlotte arrange all the settlement details—it's much the wisest—and make her be generous, I beg of you. How will you let them know *over there*? A letter, I imagine. None too easy, but the less ink spilled, the better. We'll see about that between us. Then there's the question of your luggage. I've none of your things here any more. Such little details are far more upsetting than a major decision, but don't worry too much. . . . Will you kindly stop tearing the skin off the side of your toe all the time! That's the way to get an ingrowing toe-nail!"

Automatically, he let his foot drop to the floor. Under the weight of his sullen taciturnity, he found it a strain to focus his jaded attention on what Léa was saying. He stared at his mistress's happy, animated, imperious features, and asked himself vaguely: 'Why does she look so happy?'

His bewilderment became so obvious that Léa stopped in the middle of her monologue on their chances of buying old Berthelémy's yacht from him. "Could anyone believe that you've not got one word of advice to give? Oh, you might still be twelve!"

Chéri, snatched from his stupor, put a hand to his forehead and looked at Léa, his eyes filled with melancholy.

"Being with you, Nounoune, is likely to keep me twelve for half a century."

She blinked her eyes several times as if he had breathed on their lids, and let silence settle again.

"What are you trying to say?" she asked at last.

"Nothing, except what I did say, Nounoune. Nothing but the truth. And can you deny it, you, the most honest person alive?"

She decided to laugh, but her gaiety masked a terrible fear.

"But half your charm lies in your childishness, stupid! Later on it will be the secret of your eternal youth. Why complain of it? And you have the cheek to complain of it to *me*!"

"Yes, Nounoune. Do you expect me to complain to anyone but you?" and he caught hold of the hand she had taken away. "My own Nounoune, dearest, darling Nounoune, I'm not only complaining of myself: I'm accusing you!"

She felt the grip of his firm hand. Instead of looking away, his large dark eyes with lashes gleaming clung pitifully to hers. She was determined not to tremble, yet. 'It's nothing, it's nothing,' she thought. 'It calls only for two or three sharp words and he'll become insulting, then sulky, and then I'll forgive him. . . . It's no more than that.' But she failed to find the quick rebuke which would change the expression on his face. "Come, come, child . . . You know quite well there are certain jokes I will not tolerate." But at the same moment she knew her voice to be sounding false and feeble. 'How badly I said that . . . bad theatre. . . .'

It was half-past ten, and the sun was now shining on the table between them. Léa's polished nails twinkled in its beams; but the light fell also on the soft flabby skin on the back of her well-shaped hands and on her wrists. This emphasised—like criss-crossings on a clay soil when heavy rain is followed by a dry spell—the complicated network of tiny concentric grooves and miniature parallelograms. Léa rubbed her hands absent-mindedly, turning her head to make Chéri look out of the window; but he persisted in his miserable, hang-dog moodiness. The two hands were pretending, as if in disgrace, to toy with a loop of her belt. Brusquely he pounced upon them, kissed and kissed them again, then pressed his cheek against them, murmuring "My Nounoune. . . . Oh, my poor Nounoune . . ."

"Let me alone," she cried with inexplicable anger, snatching her hands away from him.

She took a moment to regain her control, frightened of her weakness, for she had been on the verge of tears. As soon as she was able, she smiled and spoke.

"So now it's me you're sorry for! Why did you accuse me a moment ago?"

"I was wrong," he said, humbly. "For me you have been always . . ." He made a gesture to express his inability to find words worthy of her.

"*You have been?*" she underlined in a biting voice. "That sounds like an obituary notice, my good child!"

"You see . . ." he began reproachfully.

He shook his head, and she saw only too well that she could not rouse any anger in him. She tightened all her muscles, and reined in her thoughts with the help of those few words, ever the same, and inwardly repeated again and again: 'Here he is, in front of my eyes. I've only to look to see he's still there. He's not out of reach. But is he still here, with me, really and truly?'

Her thoughts escaped from the domination of these repeated phrases, only to sink into a great unvoiced lament. 'Oh! if only, if only I could somehow be returned to the moment when I was saying, "Your second piece of toast, Chéri!" for that moment's only just round the corner—it's not yet lost and gone for ever! Let's start again from there. The little that's taken place since won't count—I'll wipe it out, I'll wipe it out. I'm going to talk to him as though we're back where we were a moment ago. I'm going to talk to him about our departure, our luggage.'

She did, in fact, speak, and said, "I see . . . I see I cannot treat as a man a creature who, from sheer feebleness of character, can drive two women to distraction. Do you think that I don't understand? You like your journeys short, don't you? Yesterday at Neuilly, here to-day, but to-morrow! To-morrow, where? Here? No, no, my child, no need to lie, that guilty look would never take in even a woman stupider than I am, if there is one like that over there. . . ."

She threw out an arm to indicate Neuilly with so violent a

gesture that she upset a cake-stand, which Chéri picked up again. Her words had sharpened her grief into anguish, an angry jealous anguish pouring forth like a young wife's outburst. The rouge on her cheek turned to the deep purple of wine-lees; a strand of her hair, crimped by the curling-tongs, wriggled down her neck like a small dry snake.

"And even the woman over there, even your wife won't be found waiting there every time you choose to come back home! A wife, my child, may not always be easy to find, but she's much easier to lose! You'll have yours kept under lock and key by Charlotte, eh? That's a marvellous idea! Oh, how I'll laugh, the day when . . ."

Chéri got up, pale and serious. "Nounoune! . . ."

"Why Nounoune? What d'you mean, Nounoune? Do you think you're going to frighten me? You want to lead your own life, do you? Go ahead! You're bound to see some pretty scenes, with a daughter of Marie-Laure's. She may have thin arms and a flat behind, but that won't prevent her from . . ."

"I forbid you, Nounoune!"

He seized her by the arm; but she rose, vigorously shook herself free, and broke into hoarse laughter: "Why, of course, 'I forbid you to say a word against my wife!' Isn't that it?"

He walked round the table, trembling with indignation, and went straight up to her. "No, I forbid you—d'you hear me?—I forbid you to spoil my Nounoune!" She retreated to the end of the room, babbling, "What's that? What's that?" He followed her as though bent on chastising her. "You heard what I said. Is that the way for Nounoune to speak? What do you mean by such behaviour? Cheap little jibes like Madame Peloux's, is that what you go in for? To think they could come from you, Nounoune, from you. . . ."

Arrogantly he threw back his head. "I know how Nounoune should speak. I know how she ought to think. I've had time to learn. I've not forgotten the day when you said to me, just before I married, 'At least don't be cruel. Try not to make her suffer. I have the feeling that a doe is being thrown to a greyhound.' Those were your words. That's really you. And the night

before I married, when I ran away to come and see you, I remember you said to me . . .”

He could not go on, but all his features were bright with the memory.

“Darling, pull yourself together.” He put his hands on Léa’s shoulders. “And even last night,” he went on, “it wasn’t the first time you asked me whether I might not have hurt somebody *over there!* My Nounoune, I knew you as a fine woman, and I loved you as a fine woman, when we first started. If we have to make an end of it, must you start behaving like all the other women?”

She dimly felt the cunning behind the compliment and sat down, hiding her face in her hands.

“How hard you are, how hard,” she stammered. “Why did you come back? . . . I was so calm on my own, getting so used to . . .”

She heard herself lying and stopped.

“Well, *I* wasn’t!” Chéri said quickly. “I came back because . . . because . . .”

He raised his arms, let them drop and lifted them again. “Because I couldn’t go on without you, there’s no point in looking for any other explanation.”

For a moment no word was spoken.

Quite overcome, she looked at this impatient young man, who with light feet and open arms, as white as a seagull, seemed poised for flight.

Chéri let his dark eyes rove all over her body.

“Oh, you can be proud of yourself,” he said suddenly. “You can be proud of yourself for having made me—and what’s more for three months—lead such a life, such a life!”

“I did?”

“Who else, if it wasn’t you? If a door opened, it was Nounoune; the telephone rang, Nounoune; a letter in the garden postbox, perhaps Nounoune. . . . In the very wine I drank, I looked for you, and I never found a Pommery to equal yours. And then at nights . . . Oh, heavens above!”

He was walking up and down the carpet with rapid, noiseless steps. “I know now what it is to suffer for a woman, and no

mistake! After you, I know what all the other women will be . . . dust and ashes! Oh, how well you've poisoned me!"

She drew herself up slowly in her chair, and, letting her body turn now this way, now that, followed Chéri's movements. Her cheeks were dry, rather shiny, and their fevered flush made the blue of her eyes almost intolerable. He was walking up and down, head lowered, and he never stopped talking.

"Imagine Neuilly with you not there, the first days after my return! For that matter, everything—with you not there! I almost went mad. One night, the child was ill—I no longer remember what it was, headache, pains, something. I felt sorry for her, but I had to leave the room; otherwise nothing in the world could have stopped me saying, 'Wait, don't cry, I'll go and fetch Nounoune and she'll make you well'—and you would have come, wouldn't you, Nounoune? Great heavens, what a life it was. . . . I took on Desmond at the Hôtel Morris, paid him well into the bargain, and sometimes at night I would tell him stories. . . . I used to speak as if you were unknown to him. 'Old boy, there's never been a skin like hers. . . . Take one look at that carbochon sapphire of yours, and then hide it away for ever, because no light can turn the blue of *her* eyes to grey!' I used to tell him how you could be tough when you wanted to be; and that no one had ever got the better of you, least of all me! I used to say, 'That woman, old boy, when she's wearing just the right hat—the dark blue one with the white wing, Nounoune, last summer's—and with the way she has of putting on her clothes—you can match her against any other woman you may choose—and she'll put every one of them in the shade!' And then that wonderful manner you have of walking—of talking—your smile—the erect way you hold yourself, I used to say to him—to Desmond: 'Ah! A woman like Léa is something!' "

He snapped his fingers with proprietary pride and stopped, quite out of breath from his talking and walking. 'I never said all that to Desmond,' he thought, 'and yet I'm not telling lies. Desmond understood all right.'

He wanted to go on and glanced at Léa. She was still ready to listen. Sitting bolt upright now, she exposed to him in the

full light her noble face in its disarray, the skin shining like wax where the hot tears had dried. Her cheeks and chin were pulled down by an invisible weight, and this added a look of sadness to the trembling corners of her mouth. Chéri found intact amidst this wreckage of beauty the lovely commanding nose and the eyes as blue as a blue flower.

"And so you see, Nounoune, after months of that sort of life, I come back here, and . . ." He pulled himself up, frightened by what he had nearly said.

"You come back here, and find an old woman," Léa said calmly, in a whisper.

"Nounoune! Listen, Nounoune!"

He threw himself on his knees beside her, looking like a guilty, tongue-tied child no longer able to hide his misdemeanour.

"And you find an old woman," Léa repeated. "So what are you afraid of, child?"

She put her arms round his shoulders, and felt his body rigid and resistant, in sympathy with the hurt she was suffering. "Come, cheer up, my Chéri. Don't cry, my pretty. . . . What is it you're afraid of? Of having hurt me? Far from it: I feel so grateful to you."

He gave a sob of protestation, finding no strength to gainsay her.

She put her cheek against his tousled black hair. "Did you say all that, did you really think all that of me? Was I really so lovely in your eyes, tell me? And so kind? At the age when a woman's life is so often over, was I really the loveliest for you, the most kind, and were you really in love with me? How grateful I am to you, my darling! The finest, did you say? . . . My poor child."

He let himself go, while she supported him in her arms.

"Had I really been the finest, I should have made a man of you, and not thought only of the pleasures of your body, and my own happiness. The finest! Oh no, my darling, I certainly wasn't that, since I kept you to myself. And now it's almost too late. . . ."

He seemed to be asleep in Léa's arms; but his obstinately

tight-shut eyelids quivered incessantly, and with one lifeless hand he was clutching hold of her *négligée* and slowly tearing it.

"It's almost too late, it's almost too late. But all the same . . ." She leaned over him. "Listen to me, my darling. Wake up, my pretty, and listen to me with your eyes open. Don't be afraid of looking at me. I am, after all, the woman you were in love with, you know, the finest woman . . ."

He opened his eyes, and his first tearful glance was already filled with a selfish, mendicant hope.

Léa turned away her head. 'His eyes . . . Oh, we must get this over quickly. . . .' She put her cheek against his forehead.

"It was I, child, it was my real self who said to you, 'Don't cause unnecessary pain; spare the doe. . . .' I had quite forgotten, but luckily you remembered. You are breaking away from me very late in the day, my naughty little boy; I've been carrying you next to my heart for too long, and now you have a load of your own to carry: a young wife, perhaps a child. . . . I am to blame for everything you lack. . . . Yes, yes, my pretty, here you are, thanks to me, at twenty-five, so light-hearted, so spoilt, and at the same time so sad. . . . I'm very worried about you. You're going to suffer and make others suffer. You who have loved me. . . ."

His fingers tightened their grip on her *négligée*, and Léa felt the sharp nails of her "naughty child" bite into her breast.

"You who have loved me," she went on after a pause, "will you be able to? . . . I don't know how to explain what I mean. . . ."

He drew back in order to listen: and she could barely restrain herself from saying, "Put your hand back on my breast and your nails where they have left their mark; my strength abandons me as soon as your flesh is parted from mine." Instead, she leaned over him as he knelt in front of her, and continued: "You have loved me, and you will regret . . ."

She smiled at him, looking down into his eyes.

"What vanity, eh! . . . But you will regret me! I beg of you, when you're tempted to terrify the girl entrusted to your care and keeping, do restrain yourself! At such moments, you must

find for yourself the wisdom and kindness you never learned from me. I never spoke to you of the future. Forgive me, Chéri—I've loved you as if we were both destined to die within the same hour. Because I was born twenty-four years before you, I was doomed, and I dragged you down with me. . . ."

He was listening very attentively, which made his face look hard. She put her hand on his forehead to smooth the furrows of anxiety.

"Can you see us, Chéri, going out to lunch together at Armenonville! . . . Can you see us inviting Monsieur and Madame Lili! . . ."

She gave a sad little laugh, and shivered.

"Oh, I'm just about as done for as that old creature. . . . Quick, quick, child, run off after your youth! Only a small piece of it has been snipped off by ageing women: all the rest is there for you and the girl who is waiting for you. You've now had a taste of youth! It never satisfies, but one always goes back for more. Oh, you had started to make comparisons before last night. . . . And what am I up to now, doling out all this advice and displaying the greatness of my soul! What do I know of you two? She loves you: it's her turn to tremble; but her misery will come from passion and not from perverted mother love. And you will talk to her like a master, not capriciously, like a gigolo. Quick, quick, run off. . . ."

She spoke in tones of hasty supplication. He listened, standing planted before her, his chest bare, his hair tempestuous: and so alluring, that she had to clasp her hands to prevent their seizing hold of him. He guessed this, perhaps, and did not move away. For an instant they shared a lunatic hope—do people feel like this in mid-air when falling from a tower?—then the hope vanished.

"Go," she said in a low voice. "I love you. It's too late. Go away. But go away at once. Get dressed!"

She rose and fetched him his shoes, spread out his crumpled shirt and his socks. He stood helpless, moving his fingers awkwardly as if they were numb. She had to find his braces and his tie; but she was careful not to go too close to him and offered

him no further help. While he was dressing, she glanced into the courtyard several times, as if she were expecting a carriage at the door.

He looked even paler when he was dressed, and a halo of fatigue round his eyes made them seem larger.

"You don't feel ill?" she asked him. And she added timidly, lowering her eyes, "You could always lie down for a little." But at once she pulled herself together and came over to him, as though he were in great danger. "No, no, you'll be better at home. Hurry, it's not yet midday; a good hot bath will soon put you to rights, and then the fresh air . . . Here are your gloves. . . . Your hat? On the floor, of course. Put your coat on, there's a nip in the air. Au revoir, my Chéri, au revoir. That's right. And tell Charlotte that . . ." She closed the door behind him, and silence put an end to her vain and desperate words. She heard Chéri stumble on the staircase and she ran to the window. He was going down the front steps and then he stopped in the middle of the courtyard.

"He's coming back! He's coming back!" she cried, raising her arms.

An old woman, out of breath, repeated her movements in the long pier-glass, and Léa wondered what she could have in common with that crazy creature.

Chéri continued on his way towards the street. On the pavement he buttoned up his overcoat to hide his crumpled shirt. Léa let the curtain fall back into place; but already she had seen Chéri throw back his head, look up at the spring sky and the chestnut trees in flower, and fill his lungs with the fresh air, like a man escaping from prison.

*THE LAST OF
CHERI*

Translated by Roger Senhouse

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Chéri closed the iron gate of the little garden behind him and sniffed the night air: "Ah! it's nice out here!" In the same breath, he changed his mind: "No, it isn't."

The thickly planted chestnut trees weighed heavily upon the heat pent up beneath. A dome of rusted leaves vibrated above the nearest gas-lamp. The Avenue Henri-Martin, close-set with greenery, was stifling; only with the dawn would a breath of fresh air come up from the Bois de Boulogne.

Bare-headed, Chéri turned back to look at the house, empty now but still lit up. He heard the clink of roughly handled glass, followed by the clear ring of Edmée's voice, sharp with reproof. He saw his wife come to the window of the gallery on the first floor and lean out. The frosted beads on her evening dress lost their snowy whiteness, caught for a moment a greenish glint from the lamp, then flamed into yellow as she touched the gold lamé curtains.

"Is that you on the pavement, Fred?"

"Who else could it be?"

"You didn't take Filipesco home, then?"

"No, I didn't; he'd hopped it already."

"All the same, I'd rather have liked . . . Oh well, it doesn't matter. Are you coming in now?"

"Not just yet. Far too hot. I'll just stretch my legs."

"But . . . Oh well, just as you like."

She broke off a moment, and must have been laughing, for he could see the quiver of her frost-spangled dress.

"All I can see of you from here is a white shirt-front and a

white face cut out on black. Exactly like a poster for a night club. It looks devastating."

"How you adore my mother's expressions!" he said reflectively. "You can tell everyone to go to bed. I've got my key."

She waved a hand in his direction. He watched the lights go out one by one in all the windows. One particular light—a dull blue gleam—told Chéri that Edmée was going through her boudoir into their bedroom, which looked out on the garden at the back of the house.

'The boudoir will soon come to be known as the study, and no mistake,' he thought.

The clock of Janson-de-Sailly began to strike and Chéri cocked his ear to catch the chiming notes in flight, like drops of rain. 'Midnight! She's in a hurry to get to bed. . . . Yes, of course, she has to be at her Hospital by nine to-morrow morning.' He took a few nervous steps, shrugged his shoulders, and grew calmer.

'It's as if I'd married a ballet-dancer. Nine o'clock sharp, the class: it's sacrosanct. It has to come before everything else.'

He walked on as far as the entrance to the Bois. The day's dust, hanging in the pallid sky, dimmed the brightness of the stars. Step for step, a second tread echoed Chéri's: he stopped and waited for it to catch up with him. He disliked anyone walking behind him.

"Good evening, Monsieur Peloux," said the night-watchman, touching his cap.

Chéri answered by raising a finger to his forehead with the condescension of an officer—a trick he had picked up during the war from his fellow quartermaster-sergeants—and walked on past the night-watchman, who was trying the locks on the iron gates to the little private gardens.

From a couple of lovers on a bench just inside the Bois, came the rustle of crushed clothes and the whisper of smothered endearments. Chéri listened for an instant to the clasped bodies and invisible lips, a sound like the ripple of a ship's prow cleaving calm waters.

'The man's a soldier,' he noticed. 'I've just heard him unbuckle his belt.'

He was not thinking, which left his every sense on the alert. On many a calm night during the war Chéri had derived complex pleasure and subtle terror from his primitive keenness of hearing; his fingers, even when caked with mud and pocket fug, had been quick to distinguish the image on medal or coin, and to tell, by leaf or stalk, plants whose name he did not know. "Hi, there, Peloux lad, just tell us what I've got ahold of here?" Chéri recalled the ginger-headed lad who, under cover of darkness, would push into his hand a dead mole, a small snake, a tree-frog, an over-ripe fruit, or some piece of filth, and then exclaim, "Blimey, he gets it every time!" The memory made him smile, but with no pity for the ginger-headed lad, now dead. Yet he was haunted sometimes by the picture of his pal Pierquin, lying there on his back asleep for ever, with a look of distrust still on his face. He often spoke of him.

This very evening, at home, when dinner was over, Edmée had deftly steered the conversation round to the pathetic little tale, put together with such studied clumsiness. Chéri had it off by heart and it ended with the words: "And then Pierquin said to me, 'I had a dream about cats, old lad; and then I'd another dream about our river at home and it looked fair mucky. . . . The meaning of that's pretty clear. . . .' It was at this very moment he was picked off, by the smallest scrap of shrapnel. I wanted to carry him back. They found the two of us, him on the top of me, not a hundred yards from the spot. I tell you about him because he was a rare good sort . . . and he had quite a lot to do with my being given this."

And, as he ended on this modest note, Chéri had lowered his eyes to his green-and-red riband and knocked the ash off his cigarette, as though to keep himself in countenance. He considered it nobody's business that a chance explosion had thrown one of them across the other's shoulders, leaving Chéri alive and Pierquin dead. The truth—more ambiguous than falsehood—was that the terrific weight of a Pierquin, suddenly struck dead, had kept Chéri alive and half-suffocated, indignant and resentful. Chéri still bore a grudge against Pierquin. And, further, he had come to scorn the truth ever since the day when, years ago,

it had suddenly fallen from his mouth like a belch, to spatter and wound one whom he had loved.

But at home this evening, the Americans—Majors Marsh-Meyer and Atkins, and Lieutenant Wood—had not appeared to listen to him. With the vacant faces of athletic first-communicants, with fixed and expressionless eyes, they had simply been waiting to go to a night club, waiting with almost painful anxiety. As for Filipesco! 'Needs watching,' Chéri decided laconically.

The lake in the Bois was encircled with a fragrant mist that rose rather from the scythed slopes of its banks than from the stagnant water. Chéri was about to lean against a tree, when, from the shadows, a woman boldly brushed against him. "Good evening, kid . . ." The last word made him start; it was uttered in a low parched voice, the very voice of thirst, of dusty roads, of this dry hot night. . . . He made no answer, and the dim figure came a step nearer on soft-soled shoes. But he caught a whiff of black woollens, soiled linen, dank hair, and turned back with long springy strides towards his own home.

The dull blue light was still on: Edmée had not yet left her boudoir-study. In all probability she would still be seated at her desk, signing chits for drugs and dressings, reading through the day's notes and the short reports made by her secretary. Her pretty school-marm head, crimped hair with a reddish tint, would be bent over her papers.

Chéri pulled out the small flat key on the end of its thin gold chain. 'Here we go. In for another carefully measured dose of love. . . .'

As was his habit, he entered his wife's boudoir without knocking. Edmée showed no sign of surprise, but went on with her telephone conversation. Chéri listened.

"No, not to-morrow. . . . You won't want me there for that. The General knows you perfectly well. And at the Ministry of Commerce, there's . . . What do you mean? 'Have I got Lémery?' No, certainly not! He's charming, but . . . Hullo? . . . Hullo? . . ." She laughed, showing her small teeth. "Oh come! that's going too far. . . . Lémery makes up to every

woman, provided she's not blind or lame. . . . What? Yes, he's come in, he's here at my elbow. No, no, I'll be very discreet. . . . Goodbye. . . . See you to-morrow. . . ."

A plain white wrap, the white of her pearl necklace, was slipping off one shoulder. She had taken the pins from her chestnut hair, which, slightly frizzed by the dry atmosphere, followed every movement of her head.

"Who was that?" Chéri asked, as she put back the receiver and turned to ask him:

"Fred, you'll let me have the Rolls to-morrow morning, won't you? It will look better for bringing the General back here to lunch."

"What General?"

"General Haar."

"Is he a Boche?"

Edmée frowned. "Really, Fred, you're too old for such jokes! General Haar is coming to inspect my Hospital to-morrow. Then he can go back to America and tell them all that my Hospital can compare with any effort of the sort over there. Colonel Beybert will be showing him round, and they'll both come back here for luncheon afterwards."

Chéri took off his dinner-jacket and sent it flying in the direction of a chair.

"I don't give a damn! I'm lunching out."

"What d'you mean? What's all this?"

A spasm of rage crossed Edmée's face; but she smiled, picked up the dinner-jacket with care, and changed her tone of voice. "Didn't you ask me a moment ago who that was on the telephone? Your mother."

Chéri collapsed into an armchair and said nothing. His features were set in their most beautiful and impassive mould. Over his forehead hovered an air of serene disapproval. This was apparent, too, on his lowered eyelids, faintly shadowed now at the approach of his thirtieth year, and on his mouth, which he was careful never to compress too tightly, keeping his lips gently apart as in sleep.

"You know," Edmée continued, "she wants Lémery, of the Ministry of Commerce, to do something about her three cargo-

loads of leather. There are three ships filled with leather, at present held up in harbour at Valparaiso. There is something in the idea, you know! The only thing is that Lémery won't grant the necessary import licence . . . at least, that's what he says. Do you know how much money the Soumabis offered your mother as a minimum commission?"

With a wave of the hand, Chéri brushed aside ships, leather, and commission.

"Not interested," he said simply.

Edmée dropped the subject, and affectionately approached her husband.

"You will have luncheon here to-morrow, won't you? There'll probably be Gibbs—the reporter from *Excelsior*, who's going to photograph the Hospital—and your mother."

Chéri shook his head with no sign of impatience.

"No," he said. "General Hagenbeck . . ."

"Haar."

" . . . and a Colonel, and my mother in her uniform. Her tunic—what d'you call it? her jacket?—with its little leather buttons; her elastic uplift-belt; epaulettes; high colonel's collar and her chin cascading over . . . and her cane. No, really, I don't pretend to be braver than I am. I'd rather go out."

He was laughing quietly to himself, and his laugh seemed mirthless. Edmée put a hand, already trembling with irritation, upon his arm; but her touch was light.

"You can't mean that seriously?"

"Certainly I can. I shall go for lunch to *Brekekekex*, or somewhere else."

"With whom?"

"With whom I choose."

He sat down and kicked off his pumps. Edmée leant against a black lacquer cabinet and racked her brain for words to make him behave sensibly. The white satin front of her dress rose and fell in rhythm to the quickened pace of her breathing, and she crossed her hands behind her back like a martyr. Chéri looked at her with an air of pretended indifference. 'She really does look a lady,' he thought. 'Hair all anyhow, in her chemise, on her way to the bath—she always looks a lady.'

She lowered her eyes, caught Chéri's, and smiled.

"You're teasing me," she said plaintively.

"No," Chéri replied. "I shan't lunch here to-morrow, that's all."

"But why?"

He rose, walked as far as the open door into their room—which was in darkness and filled with night scents from the garden—and then came back to her.

"Because I shan't. If you compel me to explain myself, I shall speak out and perhaps be rude. You'll burst into tears, and 'in your distress', as the saying goes, you'll let your wrap slip to the floor and . . . and unfortunately it won't have the slightest effect on me."

Another spasm of rage passed over his wife's features, but her much-tried patience was not yet exhausted. She smiled and shrugged the one bare shoulder peeping from under her hair.

"It's quite easy to say that it won't have any effect on you."

He was walking to and fro, clad in nothing but his short white silk pants. All the time he was testing the elasticity of his instep and calf muscles, and kept rubbing his hand over the twin brown scars under his right breast, as if to preserve their fading hue. Lean, with less flesh on his body than he had had at twenty, at the same time in better shape and training, he liked to parade up and down in front of his wife as a rival rather than a lover. He knew himself to be the more perfect specimen and, as a connoisseur, could condescend to admire in her the slim hips, the small breasts, and the graceful, almost imperceptible lines which Edmée knew so well how to clothe in tubular frocks and slinky tunics. "Are you fading away, then?" he would sometimes ask her, just for the fun of annoying her. He would watch her whole body writhe in anger, and note its sudden and unsuspected vigour.

This reply of his wife's was distasteful to him. He wanted her to look well-bred, and to be silent, if not unresponsive, in his arms. He came to a halt, puckered his brow, and looked her up and down. "Pretty manners, I must say. Do you learn them from your Physician-in-Charge? The war, Madame!"

She shrugged her bare shoulder.

"What a child you are, my poor Fred! It's lucky we're by ourselves. To go on at me like that just because of a little joke . . . which was really a compliment. And for you to try and teach me manners, you . . . you! And after seven years of marriage!"

"Where do you get the seven years from?"

He sat down, naked as he was, as though for a prolonged discussion, his legs wide apart with all the ostentation of an athlete.

"Well . . . really . . . nineteen-thirteen . . . nineteen-nineteen . . ."

"Excuse me! it's clear that we don't reckon by the same calendar. Now, I count from . . ."

Edmée arched a knee, taking the weight of her body on the other leg, a confession of her weariness; but Chéri interrupted her with: "Where's all this talk leading us? Come on, let's go to bed. You've got your ballet-class at nine to-morrow, haven't you?"

"Oh! Fred!"

Edmée crushed a rose from a black vase and threw away its petals. Chéri fanned the flames of anger still smouldering in her eyes, now moist with tears, by saying: "That's the name I give that job-lot of wounded, when I'm not thinking."

Without looking at him, she murmured through trembling lips: "You brute . . . you brute . . . you loathsome monster!"

He laughed, quite untouched.

"What d'you want me to say? As far as you're concerned, we all know you're carrying out a sacred mission. But what about me? You might just as well *have* to go to the Opera every day and practise in the Rotunda, for all the difference it would make. That would leave me just as much . . . just as much out of it. And those men I called your 'job-lot', well, they're wounded, aren't they? Wounded who are a little luckier than others, perhaps. I've got absolutely nothing to do with them either. With them, too, I'm . . . out of it."

She turned round to face him so impulsively that it made her hair fly out from her temples: "My darling, don't be so unhappy! You're not out of it at all, you're above all that!"

He got up, drawn towards a jug of iced water, on the sides of which the moisture was slowly condensing into bluish tears. Edmée hurried forward: "With or without lemon, Fred?"

"Without, thanks."

He drank, she took the empty glass from his hands, and he went towards the bathroom.

"By the way," he said. "About that leak in the cement of the bathing-pool. It ought . . ."

"I'm having it seen to. The man who makes those glass mosaics happens to be a cousin of Chuche, one of my wounded, and he won't need to be asked twice, believe me."

"Good." Then, as he was moving away, he turned round. "Tell me, this business of the Ranch shares we were talking about yesterday morning, ought we to sell or not? Supposing I went to see old Deutsch about them to-morrow morning, and had a chin-wag with him?"

Edmée gave a shriek of schoolgirl laughter.

"Do you think I waited for you about that? Your mother had a stroke of genius this morning, while we were giving the Baroness a lift home."

"You mean that old La Berche woman?"

"Yes, the Baroness. Your mother, as you so elegantly put it, had a chin-wag with her. The Baroness is one of the original shareholders, and never leaves the Chairman of the Board alone for a moment. . . ."

"Except to cover her face in flour."

"Must you interrupt me the whole time? . . . and by two o'clock, my dear, the whole lot had been sold—every bit of it! The little flare up on the Bourse this afternoon—it lasted only a very short time—raked us in something like two hundred and sixteen thousand francs, Fred! That'll pay for piles of medicine and bandages. I wanted to keep the news till to-morrow, and then give you one of these topping note-cases. Kiss?"

He stood, naked and white-skinned, holding back the folds of the door-curtain, and looking closely at the expression on his wife's face.

"That's all very well . . ." he said at last, "but where do I come in?"

Edmée gave a mischievous shake of the head: "Your power of attorney still stands, my love. 'The right to sell, purchase, draw up or sign an agreement made out in my name . . . etcetera'—which reminds me, I must send the Baroness something as a souvenir."

"A briar pipe," said Chéri, after pretending to have given the matter his attention.

"No, don't laugh. The good soul is so valuable to us."

"And who are 'us'?"

"Your mother and me. The Baroness knows how to talk to the men in a way they understand. She speaks their language. She tells them rather risky stories, but in such a way . . . They dote on her."

The strangest of laughs trembled on Chéri's lips. He let go his hold on the dark curtain, and it fell back into place behind him, thus obliterating him completely, as sleep obliterates the figment of a dream. He walked along a passage dimly lit by a blue globe, without making a sound, like a figure floating on air; for he had insisted upon having thick carpets laid on every floor, from top to bottom of the house. He loved silence, and furtiveness, and never knocked at the door of the boudoir, which his wife, since the war, called her study. She showed no annoyance, and sensing Chéri's presence, never jumped when he came into the room.

He took a shower bath without lingering under the cool water, sprayed himself with scent absent-mindedly, and returned to the boudoir.

He could hear the sound of someone rumpling the sheets in the bedroom next door, and the tap of a paper-knife against a cup on the bedside table. He sat down and rested his chin in his hand. On the little table beside him, he caught sight of the morrow's menu, duly made out for the butler, according to daily routine. On it he read: "*Homard Thermidor, Côtelettes Fulbert-Dumonteil, Chaudfroid de canard, salade Charlotte, Soufflé au curaçao, Allumettes au Chester.*" . . . 'No alteration required,' he murmured to himself. "*Six places?*"—'Ah, yes, that I must alter.' He corrected the number, and once more cupped his chin in his hand.

"Fred, do you know what time it is?"

He did not answer the soft voice, but went into their room and sat down facing the bed. With one shoulder bare and the other half-hidden by a wisp of white nightgown, Edmée was smiling, despite her tired state, aware that she looked prettier in bed than out. But Chéri remained seated, and once again cupped his chin in his hand.

"Rodin's *Penseur*," said Edmée, to encourage him to smile or to move.

"There's many a true word spoken in jest," he answered sententiously.

He pulled the folds of his Chinese dressing-gown closer over his knees and savagely crossed his arms.

"What the hell am I doing here?"

She did not understand, or had no wish to do so.

"That's what I'd like to know, Fred. It's two o'clock, and I get up at eight. To-morrow's going to be another of those pleasant little days. . . . It's unkind of you to dawdle like this. Do come along; there's a nice breeze rising. We'll go to bed with it on our faces, and imagine we're sleeping out of doors."

He weakened, and hesitated only an instant before hurling his silk wrap to a far corner of the room, while Edmée switched out the remaining light. She nestled up against him in the dark, but he neatly turned her over with her back to him and held her round the waist with strong arms, murmuring, "Like that. That's like being on a bob-sleigh," and fell asleep.

The following day, from the little window of the linen-room where he was hidden, he watched them leave. The duck's-egg green motor and another long American automobile were purring very quietly in the avenue under the thick overhanging chestnut trees. The green shade and the recently watered pavement exuded a pretence of freshness, but Chéri knew very well that in the garden at the back of the house the heat of this June morning—the month that scorches Paris—was already shrivelling the lovely deep blue of a pool of forget-me-nots within their edging of pinks.

His heart began to beat with a sort of nervousness when he

saw, approaching the iron gates to his house, two figures in khaki, with gold stars on their breast and crimson velvet bands round their caps.

"In uniform, of course, the crackpot!"

This was the nickname Chéri had bestowed on the Physician-in-Charge at Edmée's Hospital, and without really knowing it, he loathed the man and his red-gold hair and the caressing tones he put into technical terms when talking to Edmée. He muttered vague hearty curses, against the Medical Corps in particular, and against all who insisted on wearing uniform in peacetime. The American officer was growing fat, so Chéri sneered: "I thought the Americans went in for sport. What's he doing with a belly like that?" but he said not a word when Edmée, in a white dress and white shoes, vivaciously held out her white-gloved hand to the Doctor. She greeted him in loud, quick, cheerful tones. Chéri had not missed a single word that fell from her red mouth, which parted in a smile over such tiny teeth. She had walked out as far as the motors, come back to tell a footman to fetch a notebook she had forgotten and stood chatting while she waited for it. She had spoken in English to the American Colonel, and lowered her voice, in automatic deference, when replying to Doctor Arnaud.

Chéri was keeping a sharp look-out from behind the muslin curtains. His characteristic mistrust and slyness froze his features into immobility directly he concealed a strong emotion, and he kept a strict watch on himself, even when alone. His eyes travelled from Edmée to the Doctor, and then from the American Colonel back to Edmée, who had more than once looked up to the first floor, as though she knew of his hiding-place.

'What are they waiting for?' he grumbled under his breath. 'Ah, so this is it. . . . God in heaven!'

Charlotte Peloux had arrived, in a sports-car driven by an impersonal and impeccable young chauffeur. Bursting out of her gabardine uniform, she held her head stiffly upright under its little tight-fitting hat with a military peak, and the ends of her bobbed red hair could be seen popping out at the back. She did not set foot to ground, but suffered them to come and pay

their respects to her. She received Edmée's kiss and apparently asked after her son, for she too raised her head in the direction of the first floor, thus unveiling her magnificent eyes, over which drifted, as over the huge eyes of an octopus, some dark inhuman dream.

"She's wearing her little military cap," Chéri murmured.

He gave a curious shudder, which made him angry with himself, and smiled when the three motors drove away. He waited patiently until his "bachelor's runabout" drew up against the kerb punctually at eleven o'clock, and he kept it waiting for some considerable time. Twice he stretched out his hand to lift the receiver of the telephone, and twice he let it fall again to his side. His sudden impulse to invite Filipesco soon vanished and he thought he would like to collect young Maudru and his girl. 'Or, better still, Jean de Touzac. . . . But at this hour he'll still be furiously snoring. Gosh! all that lot . . . not one of them, I must be fair, a patch on Desmond. . . . Poor old boy.'

He regarded Desmond as a war casualty; but with greater compassion than he ever vouchsafed the dead. Desmond, who was alive yet lost to him, had the power of inspiring him with an almost tender melancholy, as well as with the jealous respect due to a man with a "job". Desmond ran a night club, and sold antiques to Americans. A gutless wash-out during the whole of the war, when he had carried anything and everything but a rifle—official papers, billy-cans, any dirty hospital receptacle—Desmond had bitten deep into peacetime with a warlike fervour, and rich had been his immediate reward, very much to Chéri's astonishment. *Desmond's* had been started in quite a small way in a private house in the Avenue d'Alma, and now it sheltered frenzied and silent couples behind its heavy ashlar masonry, beneath ceilings decorated with swallows and hawthorn, and hemmed in by the bulrushes and flamingoes of its stained-glass windows. They danced at *Desmond's*, night and day, as people dance after war: the men, young and old, free from the burden of thinking and being frightened—empty-minded, innocent; the women, given over to a pleasure far greater than any more definite sensual delight, to the company of men: that is to say,

to physical contact with them, their smell, their tonic sweat, the certain proof of which tingled in every inch of their bodies—the certainty of being the prey of a man wholly alive and vital, and of succumbing in his arms to rhythms as personal, as intimate, as those of sleep.

‘Desmond will have got to bed at three, or three-thirty,’ Chéri reckoned. ‘He’ll have had enough sleep.’

But once again he let drop the hand he had stretched out to the telephone. He went down the stairs in double quick time, aided by the springy thick pile that covered every floor board in his house. As he passed by the dining-room he looked without anger at the five white plates set in a diadem round a black crystal bowl, in which floated pink water-lilies, matching the pink of the tablecloth; and he did not pause till face to face with the looking-glass, fixed to the back of the heavy door of the reception-room on the ground floor. He feared, yet was attracted by, this looking-glass, which drew what little light it had from the French windows immediately facing it across the corridor, their opaque blue panes further obscured by the dark foliage of the garden. Every time he bumped into his own image, Chéri was brought up sharp by a slight shock when he recognised it as his own. He never could understand why this glass did not reflect the faithful image of a young man of twenty-four. He could not detect the precise points where time, with invisible finger, marks first the hour of perfection on a handsome face, and then the hour of that more blatant beauty, the herald of a majestic decline.

To Chéri’s mind, there could be no question of a decline, and he could never have noticed it on his own features. He had just happened to bump into a thirty-year-old Chéri and failed to recognise him; and he sometimes asked himself “What’s wrong with me?” as though he were feeling a little off-colour or had thrown his clothes on anyhow. Now he hurried past the reception-room door, and thought no more about it.

Desmond’s, being a properly organised establishment, was up and doing by midday, despite the late hours it kept. The concierge was hosing the paved courtyard, a waiter was sweeping

the steps clean, brushing away a heap of high-class rubbish—fine light dust, silver paper, corks with metal caps, stub-ends of gold-tipped cigarettes, and crumpled drinking-straws—rubbish which bore daily witness to the prosperity of *Desmond's*.

Chéri cleared at a bound the residue of last night's brisk business; but the smell inside the house barred further progress like a rope stretched across his path. Forty couples, packed like sardines, had left behind the smell—the memory of their sweat-soaked clothes—stale, and tainted with tobacco fumes. Chéri plucked up courage and leapt up the staircase, narrowed by heavy oak banisters supported on caryatids. Desmond had wasted no money on changing the stuffy sumptuosities of 1880. After removing two dividing walls, installing a refrigerator in the basement, engaging a jazz-band regardless of cost, no further outlay would be necessary for at least another year. "I'll bring it up to date to attract customers," so Desmond said, "when dancing isn't such a rage."

He slept on the second floor, in a room where convolvulus ran riot on the walls and storks on the stained-glass windows; his bath was of enamelled zinc, bordered by a tiled frieze of river-plants, and the ancient heating-apparatus wheezed like a bulldog past its prime. But the telephone shone as brightly as a weapon kept polished by daily use, and Chéri, after bounding up four steps at a time, discovered his friend, lips to the chalice, apparently imbibing the murky breath of its mouthpiece. His wandering glance came down to earth, and hardly settled on Chéri before it was off and up again to the convolvulus-wreathed cornice. His yellow-gold pyjamas cast a blight over a morning-after-the-night-before face, but Desmond was inflated by prosperity and no longer worried about being ugly.

"Good morning," said Chéri. "I came through all right. What a stench there is on your stairs. Worse than a dug-out."

". . . You'll never get *Desmond's* custom at twelve," Desmond was saying to an invisible listener. "I have no difficulty in buying Pommery at that price. And for my private cellar, Pommery ought to be eleven when minus labels . . . hullo . . . yes, the labels that came off in the general rumpus. That's what I want . . . hullo?"

"You're coming out to lunch. I've got the runabout at the door," Chéri said.

"No, and twice times no," said Desmond.

"What?"

"No, and a thousand times no. Hullo? . . . Sherry! What d'you take me for? This isn't a bar. Champagne, or nothing. Don't go on wasting your time and mine. Hullo. . . . That's quite possible. Only I'm all the rage at the moment. Hullo. . . . At two o'clock precisely. A very good day to you, Monsieur."

He stretched himself, before offering a limp hand. He still looked like Alfonso XIII, but thirty summers and the war had rooted this uncertain creature in the soil he needed. To have come through the war without firing a shot, to have eaten regularly, taken every advantage of it, and malingered in general, were so many personal victories from which he had emerged strengthened and self-confident. Assurance and a full pocket had made him less ugly, and you could be sure that, at sixty, he would give the illusion of having once passed for a handsome man with a large nose and long legs. He looked at Chéri condescendingly, but with a friendlier eye. Chéri turned away his head and said: "What! Are you reduced to this? Come on, old boy. It's midday and you're not up yet."

"In the first place, I *am* ready," Desmond replied, unbuttoning his pyjamas to show a white silk shirt and a bronze-coloured bow tie. "And in the second, I'm not going to lunch out."

"So that's it," said Chéri. "Well, of all . . . I'm speechless. . . ."

"But if you like I can give you two fried eggs, and half my ham, my salad, my stout and my strawberries. No extra charge for coffee."

Chéri looked at him in impotent fury. "Why?"

"Business," said Desmond, with a deliberately nasal twang. "Champagne! You heard what I was saying a moment ago. Oh! these wine-merchants! If one didn't put on the screw . . . But I'm a match for them."

He knotted his fingers and the knuckle-joints cracked with commercial pride.

"Yes or no?"

"Yes, you swine."

Chéri chucked his soft felt hat at his head; but Desmond picked it up and brushed it with his forearm, to show that this was not the moment for childish jokes. They had eggs in aspic, ham and tongue, and good black stout with coffee-coloured foam on it. They spoke little, and Chéri, gazing out on to the paved courtyard, was politely bored.

'What am I doing here? Nothing, except that I'm not at home, sitting down to cutlets Fulbert-Dumonteil.' He visualised Edmée in white, the baby-faced American Colonel, and Arnaud, the Physician-in-Charge, in whose presence she acted the docile little girl. He thought of Charlotte Peloux's epaulettes, and a sort of fruitless affection for his host was coming over him, when the latter asked him an abrupt question:

"Do you know how much champagne was drunk here last night, between four o'clock yesterday and four o'clock this morning?"

"No," said Chéri.

"And do you know how many bottles were returned empty from those delivered here between May the first and June the fifteenth?"

"No," said Chéri.

"Say a number."

"No idea," Chéri grunted.

"But say something! Say a number! Have a guess, man! Name some figure!"

Chéri scratched the tablecloth as he might during an examination. He was suffering from the heat, and from his own inertia.

"Five hundred," he got out at last.

Desmond threw himself back in his chair and, as it swerved through the air, his monocle shot a piercing flash of sunlight into Chéri's eye.

"Five hundred! You make me laugh!"

He was boasting. He did not know how to laugh: his nearest approach was a sort of sob of the shoulders. He drank some coffee, to excite Chéri's curiosity, and then put down his cup again.

"Three thousand, three hundred, and eighty-two, my boy. And do you know how much that puts in my pocket?"

"No," Chéri interrupted, "and I don't give a damn. That's enough. My mother does all that for me if I want it. Besides . . ." He rose, and added in a hesitant voice: "Besides, money doesn't interest me."

"Strange," said Desmond, hurt. "Strange. Amusing."

"If you like. No, can't you understand, money doesn't interest me . . . doesn't interest me any more."

These simple words fell from his lips slowly. Chéri spoke them without looking up, and kicked a biscuit crumb along the carpet; his embarrassment at making this confession, his secretive look, restored for a fleeting instant the full marvel of his youth.

For the first time Desmond stared at him with the critical attention of a doctor examining a patient, 'Am I dealing with a malingerer?' Like a doctor, he had recourse to confused and soothing words.

"We all go through that. Everyone's feeling a little out of sorts. No one knows exactly where he stands. Work is a wonderful way of putting you on your feet again, old boy. Take me, for instance. . . ."

"I know," Chéri interrupted. "You're going to tell me I haven't enough to do."

"Yes, it's your own fault." Desmond's mockery was condescending in the extreme. "For in these wonderful times . . ." He was going on to confess his deep satisfaction with business, but he pulled himself up in time. "It's also a question of upbringing. Obviously, you never learned the first thing about life under Léa's wing. You've no idea how to manage people and things."

"So they say." Chéri was put out. "Léa herself wasn't fooled. You mayn't believe me, but though she didn't trust me, she always consulted me before buying or selling."

He thrust out his chest, proud of the days gone by, when distrust was synonymous with respect.

"You've only got to apply yourself to it again—to money

matters," Desmond continued, in his advisory capacity. "It's a game that never goes out of fashion."

"Yes," Chéri acquiesced rather vaguely. "Yes, of course. I'm only waiting."

"Waiting for what?"

"I'm waiting. . . . What I mean is . . . I'm waiting for an opportunity . . . a better opportunity. . . ."

"Better than what?"

"What a bore you are. An excuse—if you like—to take up again everything the war deprived me of years ago. My fortune, which is, in fact . . ."

"Quite considerable?" Desmond suggested. Before the war, he would have said "enormous," and in a different tone of voice. A moment's humiliation brought a blush to Chéri's cheek.

"Yes . . . my fortune. Well, the little woman, my wife, now makes that her business."

"Oh, no!" exclaimed Desmond, in shocked disapproval.

"Oh, yes, I promise you. Two hundred and sixteen thousand in a little flare-up on the Bourse the day before yesterday. So, don't you see, the question now arises, 'How am I to interfere?' . . . Where do I stand, in all this? When I suggest taking a hand, they say . . ."

"They? Who are 'they'?"

"What? Oh, my mother and my wife. They start saying: 'Take it easy. You're a warrior. Would you like a glass of orange-ade? Run along to your shirt-maker, he's making you look a fool. And while you are going the rounds, you might call in and collect my necklace, if the clasp's been mended . . .' and so on, and so forth."

He was growing excited, hiding his resentment as best he could, though his nostrils were quivering, and his lips as well.

"So must I now tout motor-cars, or breed Angora rabbits, or direct some high-class establishment? Have I got to engage myself as a male nurse or accountant in that bargain-basement, my wife's Hospital?" He walked as far as the window, and came back to Desmond precipitately. "Under the orders of Doctor Arnaud, Physician-in-Charge, and pass the basins round

for him? Must I take up this night club business? Can't you *see* the competition!"

He laughed in order to make Desmond laugh; but Desmond, no doubt a little bored, kept a perfectly straight face.

"How long ago did you start thinking of all this? You certainly had no such ideas in the spring, or last winter, or before you were married."

"I had no time for it," Chéri answered quite simply. "We went off on our travels, we began furnishing the house, we bought motors just in time to have them requisitioned. All that led up to the war. Before the war . . . before the war I was . . . a kid from a rich home. I was rich, damn it!"

"You still are."

"I still am," Chéri echoed.

He hesitated once more, searching for words. "But now, it's not at all the same thing. People have got the jitters. And work, and activity, and duty, and women who serve their country—not half they don't—and are crazy about oof . . . they're such thorough-going business-women that they make you disgusted with the word business. They're such hard workers it's enough to make you loathe the sight of work." He looked uncertainly at Desmond, "Is it really wrong to be rich, and take life easy?"

Desmond enjoyed playing his part and making up for past subservience. He put a protective hand on Chéri's shoulder.

"My son, be rich and live your own life! Tell yourself that you're the incarnation of an ancient aristocracy. Model yourself on the feudal barons. You're a warrior."

"*Merde*," said Chéri.

"Now you're talking like a warrior. Only, you must live and let live, and let those work who like it."

"You, for instance."

"Me, for instance."

"Obviously, you're not the sort to let yourself be messed about by women."

"No," said Desmond curtly. He was hiding from the world a perverse taste for his chief cashier—a gentle creature with brown hair scraped well back, rather masculine and hairy. She

wore a religious medallion round her neck, and smilingly confessed, "For two pins I'd commit murder: I'm like that."

"No. Emphatically, no! Can't you mention anything without sooner or later dragging in 'my wife, women,' or else 'in Léa's time'? Is there nothing else to talk about in 1919?"

Beyond the sound of Desmond's voice, Chéri seemed to be listening to some other, still unintelligible sound. 'Nothing else to talk about,' he repeated to himself. 'Why should there be?' He was daydreaming, lulled by the light and the warmth, which increased as the sun came round into the room. Desmond went on talking, impervious to the stifling heat, and as white as winter endive. Chéri caught the words "little birds" and began to pay attention.

"Yes, I've a whole heap of amusing connections, with whom, of course, I'll put you in touch. And when I say 'birds', I'm speaking far too frivolously of what amounts to a unique collection, you understand, utterly unique. My regulars are tasty pieces, and all the tastier for the last four years. Just you wait and see, old boy! When my capital is big enough, what a restaurant I'll show the world! Ten tables, at most, which they'll fall over each other to book. I'll cover in the courtyard. . . . You may be sure my lease provides for all additions I make! Cork-lino in the middle of the dance-floor, spot-lights. . . . That's the future! It's out there. . . ."

The tango merchant was holding forth like a founder of cities, pointing towards the window with outstretched arm. Chéri was struck by the word "future," and turned to face the spot indicated by Desmond, somewhere high up above the courtyard. He saw nothing, and felt limp. The reverberations of the two o'clock sun smote glumly down upon the little slate roof of the old stables, where the concierge of *Desmond's* had his lodging. "What a ballroom, eh?" said Desmond with fervour, pointing to the small courtyard. "And it won't be long now before I get it!"

Chéri stared intently at this man who, each day, expected and received his daily bread. 'And what about me?' he thought, inwardly frustrated.

"Look, here comes my swipes-merchant," Desmond shouted. "Make yourself scarce. I must warm him up like a bottle of Corton."

He shook Chéri's hand with a hand that had changed its character: from being narrow and boneless, it had become broad, purposeful, disguised as the rather firm hand of an honest man. 'The war . . .' thought Chéri, tongue in cheek.

"You're off? Where?" Desmond asked.

He kept Chéri standing on the top of the steps long enough to be able to show off such a decorative client to his wine merchant.

"Over there," said Chéri, with a vague gesture.

"Mystery," murmured Desmond. "Be off to your seraglio!"

"Oh no," said Chéri, "you're quite wrong."

He conjured up the vision of some female—moist flesh, nakedness, a mouth. He shuddered with impersonal disgust, and, repeating 'You're quite wrong' under his breath, got into his runabout.

He carried away with him an all too familiar uneasiness, the embarrassment and irritation of never being able to put into words all that he really wanted to say; of never meeting the person to whom he would have to confide a half-formed admission, a secret that could have changed everything, and which, for instance, this afternoon would have dispersed the ominous atmosphere from the bleached pavements and the asphalt, now beginning to melt under a vertical sun.

'Only two o'clock,' he sighed, 'and, this month, it stays light till well after nine.'

The breath of wind raised by the speed of his motor was like a hot dry towel being flapped in his face, and he yearned for the make-believe night behind his blue curtains, to the accompaniment of the simple drip-drop-drip of the Italian fountain's sing-song in the garden.

'If I slip quickly through the hall, I'll be able to get in again without being seen. *They'll* be having coffee by now.'

He could almost catch a whiff of the excellent luncheon, of the lingering smell of the melon, of the dessert wine which Edmée always had served with the fruit; and, ahead of time,

he saw the verdigrised reflection of Chéri closing the door lined with plate glass.

‘In we go!’

Two motors were dozing in the shade of the low-hanging branches just inside the gates, one his wife’s and the other American, both in the charge of an American chauffeur who was himself taking a nap. Chéri drove on as far as the deserted Rue de Franqueville, and then walked back to his own front door. He let himself in without making a sound, took a good look at his shadowy form in the green-surfaced mirror, and softly went upstairs to the bedroom. It was just as he had longed for it to be—blue, fragrant, made for rest. In it he found everything that his thirsty drive had made so desirable: and more besides, for there was a young woman dressed in white, powdering her face and tidying her hair in front of a long looking-glass. Her back was turned to Chéri, and she did not hear him enter. Thus he had more than a moment to observe in the glass how flushed luncheon and the hot weather had made her, and to note her strange expression of untidiness and triumph and her general air of having won an emotionally outrageous victory. All at once Edmée caught sight of her husband and turned to face him without saying a word. She examined him critically from top to toe, waiting for him to speak first.

Through the half-open window facing the garden, floated up the baritone notes of Doctor Arnaud’s voice, singing, “*Oy Marie, Oy Marie.*”

Edmée’s whole body seemed to incline towards this voice, but she restrained herself from turning her head in the direction of the garden.

The slightly drunken courage visible in her eyes might well forebode a serious situation. Out of contempt or cowardice, Chéri, by putting a finger to his lips, enjoined silence upon her. He then pointed to the staircase with the same imperative finger. Edmée obeyed. She went resolutely past him, without being able to repress, at the moment when she came closest to him, a slight twist of the hips and quickening of the step, which kindled in Chéri a sudden impulse to strike her. He leant over the banisters, feeling reassured, like a cat that has reached safety at the

top of a tree; and, still thinking of punishing, smashing, and taking flight, he waited there, ready to be wafted away on a flood of jealousy. All that came to him was a mediocre little feeling of shame, all too bearable, as he put his thoughts into words, 'Punish her, smash up the whole place! There's better to do than that. Yes, there's better to do.' But what, he did not know.

Each morning for him, whether he woke early or late, was the start of a long day's vigil. At first he paid but scant attention, believing it to be merely the persistence of an unhealthy habit picked up in the army.

In December, 1918, after putting his knee-cap out of joint, he had eked out in his bed at home a short period of convalescence. He used to stretch himself in the early morning and smile. 'I'm comfortable. I'm waiting for the time when I feel much better. Christmas this year is really going to be worth while.'

Christmas came. When the truffles had been eaten, and the holly twig dipped in brandy set alight on a silver platter, in the presence of an ethereal Edmée, very much the wife, and to the acclamations of Charlotte, of Madame de La Berche, and members of the nursing staff of the Hospital, together with a sprinkling of Rumanian officers and athletic adolescent American colonels, Chéri waited. 'Oh, if only those fellows would go away! I'm waiting to go to sleep, head in the cool air and feet warm, in my own good bed!' Two hours later, he was still waiting for sleep, laid out as flat as a corpse, listening to the mocking call of the little winter owls in the branches—a challenge to the blue light of his unshuttered room. At last he fell asleep; but a prey to his insatiable vigilance from the peep of dawn, he began to wait for his breakfast, and gave utterance to his hearty impatience: "What the hell do they think they're doing with the grub downstairs?" He did not realise that whenever he swore or used "soldiers' slang", it always went with an affected state of mind. His jolliness was a method of escape. Breakfast was brought to him by Edmée; but in his wife's bustling movements he never failed to discern haste and the call of duty, and he would ask for more toast, or for another hot roll which he no

longer really wanted, simply from a malicious wish to delay Edmée's departure, to delay the moment when he would once more, inevitably, resume his period of waiting.

A certain Rumanian lieutenant used to be sent off by Edmée to look for concentrated disinfectant and absorbent cotton wool, or again to press a demand upon Ministers—"What the government refuses point-blank to a Frenchman, a foreigner gets every time," she affirmed. He used to bore Chéri stiff by cracking up the duties of a soldier, fit or nearly fit, and the paradisal purity of the Coictier Hospital. Chéri went along there with Edmée, sniffed the smells of antiseptics which relentlessly suggest underlying putrefaction, recognised a comrade among the "Trench Feet" and sat down on the edge of his bed, forcing himself to assume the cordiality prescribed by war novels and patriotic plays. He knew well enough, all the same, that a man in sound health, who had come through unscathed, could find no peer or equal among the crippled. Wherever he looked, he saw the fluttering white wings of the nurses, the red-brick colour of the faces and hands upon the sheets. An odious sense of impotence weighed upon him. He caught himself guiltily stiffening one of his arms as if held in a sling, or dragging one of his legs. But the next moment he could not help taking a deep breath and picking his way between the recumbent mummies with the light step of a dancer. He was forced reluctantly to reverence Edmée, because of her authority as a non-commissioned angel, and her aura of whiteness. She came across the ward, and, in passing, put a hand on Chéri's shoulder; but he knew that the desire behind this gesture of tenderness and delicate possession was to bring a blush of envy and irritation to the cheek of a young dark-haired nurse who was gazing at Chéri with the candour of a cannibal.

He felt bored, and consumed by the feeling of weariness that makes a man jib at the serried ranks of masterpieces before him as he is being dragged round a museum. The plethora of whiteness, thrown off from the ceiling and reflected back from the tiled floor, blotted out all corners, and he felt sorry for the men lying there, to whom shade would have been a charity, though no one offered it. The noonday hour imposes rest and privacy

upon the beasts of the field, and the silence of deep woodland undergrowth upon the birds of the air, but civilised men no longer obey the dictates of the sun. Chéri took a few steps towards his wife, with the intention of saying: "Draw the curtains, install a punkah, take away that macaroni from the poor wretch who's blinking his eyes and breathing so heavily, and let him eat his food when the sun goes down. Give them shade, let them have any colour you like, but not always and everywhere this eternal white." With the arrival of Doctor Arnaud, he lost his inclination to give advice and make himself useful.

The Doctor, with his white linen belly and his red-gold hair, had taken no more than three steps across the ward, before the hovering non-commissioned angel glided to earth again, to minister as a humble seraph, rosy with faith and zeal. Chéri thereupon turned to Filipesco, who was distributing American cigarettes, shouted "Are you coming?" in contemptuous tones, and bore him away; but not before he had bidden farewell to his wife, to Doctor Arnaud, to nurses male and female, with the haughty affability of an official visitor. He crossed the rough gravel of the little courtyard, got into his car, and allowed himself no more than a dozen words' soliloquy: 'It's the regular thing. The correct move for the Physician-in-Charge.'

Never again did he cross the threshold of the Hospital, and thereafter Edmée invited him on State occasions only, out of official courtesy, much as one might, at a dinner party, politely offer the snipe to a vegetarian guest.

He was now given over to reflection, and a prey to idleness. Before the war his idleness had been so light and varied, with the resonant ring of a flawless empty glass. During the war, too, he had endured periods of inertia under military discipline, inertia modified by cold, mud, risk, patrols, and even, on occasion, a little fighting. Conditioned to indolence by his upbringing and the life of a sensual young man, he had watched, himself untouched, the fresh young vulnerable companions all round him pine away in silence, solitude, and frustration. He had witnessed the ravages inflicted on intelligent people by the lack of

newspapers as if they were being deprived of a daily drug. Whereas he had relapsed into contemplative silence—like a cat in a garden at night—content with a short letter, a postcard, or a cunningly packed parcel, other men, so-called superior men, had appeared to him to be showing every symptom of ruinous mental starvation. Thus he had learned to take pride in bolstering up his patience, and had brooded over two or three ideas, over two or three persistent memories, as highly coloured as a child's, and over his inability to imagine his own death.

Time and again, throughout the war, on coming out of a long dreamless sleep or a fitful bout of spasmodically interrupted rest, he would awake to find himself somewhere outside the present time and, his more recent past sloughed off, restored to the days of his boyhood—restored to Léa. Later, Edmée would suddenly rise up from the past, distinct and clear in every detail, and this evocation of her form, no less than its almost immediate disappearance, had always put Chéri in good spirits. "That gives me two of them," he reckoned. Nothing came to him from Léa; he did not write to her. But he received postcards signed by the crabbed fingers of old mother Aldonza, and cigars chosen by the Baroness de La Berche. Sometimes he dreamed of a long soft-wool scarf, as blue as a pair of blue eyes and with a very faint suggestion of the scent associated with it throughout long hours of warmth and slumber. He had loved this scarf and hugged it to him in the dark, until it had lost its fragrance and the freshness of the blue eyes, and he had thought of it no more.

For four years he had not bothered his head about Léa. Her trusty old cronies, had occasion arisen, would have forwarded news of any events in her life. He never imagined anything happening to her. What had Léa in common with sickness, or Léa with change?

In 1918 he could not believe his ears when the Baroness de la Berche casually mentioned "Léa's new flat".

"Has she moved, then?"

"Where have you sprung from?" the Baroness answered. "The whole world knows it. The sale of her house to the

Americans was a brilliant deal, you bet! I've seen her new flat. It's small, but it's very cosy. Once you sit down in it, you never want to get up again."

Chéri clung to the words "small, but cosy". Unable to imagine anything different, he supplied an over-all rose-pink background, threw in that huge galleon of gold and steel—the bed with its lace rigging—and hung Chaplin's pearly-breasted nymph from some floating cloud.

When Desmond began looking about for a sleeping partner for his night club, Chéri had spasms of alarm and anxiety. "The blackguard's certain to try and tap Léa, or get her mixed up in some fishy business . . . I'd better tip her off on the telephone." He did nothing of the sort, however. Telephoning to a discarded mistress is riskier far than holding out your hand in the street to a nervous enemy who tries to catch your eye.

He went on biding his time, even after surprising Edmée in front of the looking-glass, after that flagrant exhibition of over-excitement, flushed cheeks, and untidiness. He let the hours slip by, and did not put into words—and so accentuate—his certainty that a still almost chaste understanding existed between his wife and the man who had been singing "*Oy Marie!*" For he felt much lighter in spirit, and for several days stopped uselessly consulting his wrist-watch as soon as daylight began to fade. He developed the habit of sitting out under the trees in a basket-chair, like a newly arrived guest in an hotel garden. There he marvelled to see how the oncoming night blotted out the blue of the monkshood, producing in its stead a hazier blue into which the shapes of the flowers were fused, while the green of their leaves persisted in distinct clumps. The edging of rose-coloured pinks turned to rank mauve, then the colour ebbed rapidly and the July stars shone yellow between the branches of the weeping ash.

He tasted at home the pleasures enjoyed by a casual passer-by who sits down to rest in a square, and he never noticed how long he remained there, lying back with his hands dangling. Sometimes he gave a fleeting thought to what he called "the looking-glass scene" and the atmosphere in the blue room when it had

been secretly troubled by a man's sudden appearance, theatrical behaviour, and flight. He whispered over and over, with foolish mechanical regularity, "That's one point established. That's what's called a point-testablished," running the two words together into one.

At the beginning of July he bought a new open motor, and called it his Riviera Runabout. He drove Filipesco and Desmond out along drought-whitened roads, but returned to Paris every evening, cleaving alternate waves of warm and cool air, which began to lose their good smells the nearer the motor drew to Paris.

One day he took out the Baroness de La Berche, a virile companion, who, when they came to the barriers of the Octroi, raised her forefinger to the little felt hat pulled well down on her head. He found her agreeable, sparing of words, interested in wayside inns overgrown with wistaria, and in village wine-shops with their cellar-smell and wine-soaked sand. Rigid and in silence, they covered two hundred miles or more, without ever opening their mouths except to smoke or feed. The following day Chéri again invited Camille de La Berche with a curt "Well, how about it, Baroness?" and whisked her off without further ado.

The trusty motor sped far afield through the green countryside, and came back at nightfall to Paris like a toy at the end of a string. That evening, Chéri, while never taking his eye off the road, could distinguish on his right side the outline of an elderly woman, with a man's profile as noble as that of an old family coachman. It astonished him to find her worthy of respect because she was plain and simple, and when he was alone in her company for the first time and far away from town-life, it began to dawn on him that a woman burdened with some monstrous sexual deformity needs must possess a certain bravura and something of the dignified courage of the condemned.

Since the war this woman had found no further use for her unkindness. The Hospital had put her back in her proper place, that is to say, among males, among men just young enough, just tamed enough by suffering, for her to live serenely in their midst, and forget her frustrated femininity.

On the sly, Chéri studied his companion's large nose, the

greying hairy upper lip, and the little peasant eyes which glanced incuriously at ripe cornfields and scythed meadows.

For the first time he felt something very like friendship for old Camille, and was led to make a poignant comparison: "She is alone. When she's no longer with her soldiers or with my mother, she's alone. She too. Despite her pipe and her glass of wine, she's alone."

On their way back to Paris, they stopped at a "hostelry" where there was no ice, and where, trained against the plinths of columns and clinging to ancient baptismal fonts dotted about the lawn, the rambler-roses were dying, frizzled by the sun. A neighbouring copse screened this dried-up spot from any breeze, and a small cloud, scorched to a cherry hue, hung motionless, high in the heavens.

The Baroness knocked out her short briar pipe on the ear of a marble fawn.

"It's going to be grilling over Paris to-night."

Chéri nodded in agreement, and looked up at the cloud. The light reflected from it mottled his white cheeks and dimpled chin, like touches of pink powder on an actor's face.

"Yes," he said.

"Well, you know, if the idea tempts you, let's not go back till to-morrow morning. Just give me time to buy a piece of soap and a tooth-brush. . . . And we'll telephone your wife. Then, to-morrow morning we can be up and on our way by four o'clock, while it's fresh."

Chéri sprang to his feet in unthinking haste. "No, no, I can't."

"You can't? Come, come!"

Down near his feet he saw two small mannish eyes, and a pair of broad shoulders shaking with laughter.

"I didn't believe that you were still held on such a tight rein," she said. "But, of course, if you are . . ."

"Are what?"

She had risen to her feet again, robust and hearty, and clapped him vigorously on the shoulder.

"Yes, yes. You run around all day long, but you go back to your kennel every night. Oh, you're kept well in hand."

He looked at her coldly: already he liked her less. "There's no hiding anything from you, Baroness. I'll fetch the car, and in under two hours we'll be back at your front door."

Chéri never forgot their nocturnal journey home, the sadness of the lingering crimson in the west, the smell of the grasses, the feathery moths held prisoner in the beam of the headlamps. The Baroness kept watch beside him, a dark form made denser by the night. He drove cautiously; the air, cool at faster speeds, grew hot again when he slowed down to take a corner. He trusted to his keen sight and his alert senses, but he could not help his thoughts running on the queer massive old woman motionless at his right side, and she caused him a sort of terror, a twitching of the nerves, which suddenly landed him within a few inches of a waggon carrying no rear lamp. At that moment a large hand came lightly to rest on his forearm.

"Take care, child!"

He certainly had not expected either the gesture or the gentle tone of the voice. But nothing justified the subsequent emotion, the lump like a hard fruit stone in his throat, 'I'm a fool, I'm a fool,' he kept repeating. He continued at a slower speed, and amused himself by watching the refraction of the beams, the golden zigzags and peacock's feathers, that danced for a moment round the headlamps when seen through the tears that brimmed his eyes.

'She told me that it had a hold on me, that I was held well in hand. If she could see us, Edmée and me. . . . How long is it since we took to sleeping like two brothers?' He tried to count: three weeks, perhaps more? 'And the joke about the whole business is that Edmée makes no demands, and wakes up smiling.' To himself, he always used the word "joke" when he wished to avoid the word "sad". 'Like an old married couple, what! like an old married couple . . . Madame and her Physician-in-Charge, Monsieur . . . and . . . his car. All the same, old Camille said that I was held. Held. Held. Catch me ever taking that old girl out again. . . .'

He did take her out again, for July began to scorch Paris. But neither Edmée nor Chéri complained about the dog-days. Chéri

used to come home, polite and absent-minded, the backs of his hands and the lower part of his face nut-brown. He walked about naked between the bathroom and Edmée's boudoir.

"You must have been roasted to-day, you poor townees!" Chéri jeered.

Looking rather pale and almost melting away, Edmée straightened her pretty odalisque back and denied that she was tired.

"Oh well, not quite as bad as that, you know. There was rather more air than yesterday. My office down there is cool, you know. And then, we've had no time to think about it. My young man in bed twenty-two, who was getting on so well . . ."

"Oh yes!"

"Yes, Doctor Arnaud isn't too pleased about him."

She didn't hesitate to make play with the name of the Physician-in-Charge, much as a player moves up a decisive piece on the chess-board. But Chéri did not bat an eyelid, and Edmée followed his movements, those of a naked male body dappled a delicate green from the reflected light of the blue curtains. He walked to and fro in front of her, ostentatiously pure, trailing his aura of scent, and living in another world. The very self-confidence of this naked body, superior and contemptuous, reduced Edmée to a mildly vindictive immobility. She could not now have claimed this naked body for her own except in a voice altogether lacking the tones and urgency of desire—that is, in the calm voice of a submissive mate. Now she was held back by an arm covered with fine gold hairs, by an ardent mouth behind a golden moustache, and she gazed at Chéri with the jealous and serene security of a lover who covets a virgin inaccessible to all.

They went on to talk about holidays and travelling arrangements, in light-hearted and conventional phrases.

"The war hasn't changed Deauville enough, and what a crowd . . ." Chéri sighed.

"There's simply no place where one can eat a good meal, and it's a huge undertaking to reorganise the hotel business!" Edmée affirmed.

One day, not long before the Quatorze Juillet, Charlotte Peloux was lunching with them. She happened to speak of the

success of some business deal in American blankets, and complained loudly that Léa had netted a half share of the profits. Chéri raised his head, in astonishment. "So you still see her?"

Charlotte Peloux enveloped her son in the loving glances induced by old port, and appealed to her daughter-in-law as witness: "He's got an odd way of putting things—as if he'd been gassed—hasn't he? . . . It's disturbing at times. I've never stopped seeing Léa, darling. Why should I have stopped seeing her?"

"Why?" Edmée repeated.

He looked at the two women, finding a strange flavour in their kindly attention.

"Because you never talk to me about her . . ." he began, ingenuously.

"Me!" barked Charlotte. "For goodness sake . . . Edmée, you hear what he says? Well at least it does credit to his feelings for you. He has so completely forgotten about everything that isn't you."

Edmée smiled without answering, bent her head, and adjusted the lace that edged the low-cut neck of her dress by tweaking it between her fingers. The movement drew Chéri's attention to her bodice, and through the yellow lawn he noticed that the points of her breasts and their mauve aureolas looked like twin bruises. He shuddered, and his shudder made him realise that the conventional beauty and all the most secret details of her charming body, that the whole of this young woman, in fact, so close and so disloyal, no longer aroused in him anything but positive repugnance. Nonsense, nonsense; but he was whipping a dead horse. And he listened to Charlotte's ever flowing stream of nasal burblings.

". . . and then again, the day before yesterday, I was saying in your presence, that motor for motor, well—I'd far rather have a taxi, a taxi, any day, than that prehistoric old Renault of Léa's—and if it wasn't the day before yesterday, it was yesterday, that I said—speaking of Léa—that if you're a woman living on your own and you've got to have a manservant, you might just as well have a good-looking one. And then Camille

was saying, only the other day when you were there, how angry she was with herself for having sent a second barrel of Quarts-de-Chaumes round to Léa instead of keeping it for herself. I've complimented you often enough on your fidelity, my darling; I must now scold you for your ingratitude. Léa deserved better of you. Edmée will be the first to admit that!"

"The second," Edmée corrected.

"Never heard a word of it," Chéri said.

He was gorging himself with hard pink July cherries, and flipping them from beneath the lowered blind at the sparrows in the garden, where, after too heavy a watering, the flower beds were steaming like a hot spring. Edmée, motionless, was cogitating on Chéri's comment, "Never heard a word of it." He certainly was not lying, and yet his off-hand assumed schoolboyishness, as he squeezed the cherry stones and took aim at a sparrow by closing his left eye, spoke clearly enough to Edmée. 'What can he have been thinking about, if he never heard a word?'

Before the war, she would have looked for the woman in the case. A month earlier, on the day following the looking-glass scene, she would have feared reprisals, some Red Indian act of cruelty, or a bite on the nose. But no . . . nothing . . . he lived and roamed about innocently, as quiet in his freedom as a prisoner in the depths of a gaol, and as chaste as an animal brought from the Antipodes, which does not bother to look for a kindred female in our hemisphere.

Was he ill? He slept well, ate according to his fancy—that is, delicately, sniffing all the meat suspiciously, and preferring fruit and new-laid eggs. No nervous twitch disfigured the lovely balance of his features, and he drank more water than champagne. 'No, he's not ill. And yet he's . . . something. Something that I should guess, perhaps, if I were still in love with him. But . . . ' Once again she fingered the lace round the neck of her bodice, inhaled the warmth and fragrance that rose up from between her breasts, and as she bent down her head she saw the precious twin pink and mauve discs through the material of her dress. She blushed with carnal pleasure, and dedicated the scent and the mauve shadows to the skilful, condescending,

red-haired man whom she would be meeting again in an hour's time.

'They've spoken of Léa in front of me every day, and I didn't hear. Have I forgotten her, then? Yes, I have forgotten her. But then what does it mean, "to forget"? If I think of Léa, I see her clearly, I remember the sound of her voice, the scent which she sprayed herself with and rubbed so lavishly into her long hands.' He took such a deep breath that his nostrils were indented and his lips curled up to his nose in an expression of exquisite pleasure.

"Fred, you've just made the most horrible face; you were the spit and image of that fox Angot brought back from the trenches."

It was the least trying hour of the day for the pair of them, awake and in bed with breakfast over. After a refreshing shower-bath, they were gratified to hear the drenching rain—three months ahead of the proper season—falling in sheets that stripped the false Parisian autumn of its leaves and flattened the petunias. They did not bother to find an excuse, that morning, for having wilfully remained behind in town. Had not Charlotte Peloux hit upon the proper excuse the previous evening? She had declared, "We're all good Parigots, born and bred, aren't we! True blue one and all! We and the concierges can claim that we've had a real taste of the first post-war summer in Paris!"

"Fred, are you in love with that suit? You never stop wearing it. It doesn't look fresh, you know."

Chéri raised a finger in the direction of Edmée's voice, a gesture which enjoined silence and begged that nothing should divert his attention while he was in the throes of exceptional mental labours.

'I should like to know if I have forgotten her. But what is the real meaning of "forgotten"! A whole year's gone by without my seeing her.' He felt a sudden little shock of awakening, a tremor, when he found that his memory had failed to account for the war years. Then he totted up the years and, for an instant, everything inside him stopped functioning.

"Fred, shall I never get you to leave your razor in the bathroom, instead of bringing it in here!"

Almost naked and still damp, he took his time in turning round, and his back was silver-flecked with dabs of talcum powder.

"What?"

The voice, which seemed to come from afar, broke into a laugh.

"Fred, you look like a cake that's been badly sugared. An unhealthy looking cake. Next year, we won't be as stupid as we have been this. We'll take a place in the country."

"Do you want a place in the country?"

"Yes. Not this morning, of course."

She was pinning up her hair. She pointed with her chin to the curtain of rain, streaming down in a grey torrent, without any sign of thunder or wind.

"But next year, perhaps . . . Don't you think?"

"It's an idea. Yes, it's an idea."

He was putting her politely at arm's length, in order to return to his surprising discovery. 'I really did think that it was only one year since I'd seen her. I never took the war into reckoning. I haven't seen her for one, two, three, four, five years. One, two, three, four. . . . But, in that case, have I really forgotten her? No! Because these women have spoken of her in front of me, and I've never jumped up and shouted, "Hold on! If that's true—then what about Léa?" Five years . . . How old was she in 1914?'

He counted once more, and ran up against an unbelievable total. 'That's would make her just about sixty to-day, wouldn't it? . . . How absurd!'

"And the important thing," Edmée went on, "is to choose it carefully. Let's see, a nice part of the world would be . . ."

"Normandy," Chéri finished for her, absent-mindedly.

"Yes, Normandy. Do you know Normandy?"

"No . . . Not at all well. . . . It's green. There are lime trees, ponds . . ."

He shut his eyes, as though dazed.

"Where do you mean? In what part of Normandy?"

"Ponds, cream, strawberries and peacocks. . . ."

"You seem to know a lot about Normandy! What grand country it must be! What else d'you find there?"

He appeared to be reading out a description as he leaned over the round mirror in which he made sure of the smoothness of chin and cheeks after shaving. He went on, unmoved, but hesitatingly. "There are peacocks. . . . Moonlight on parquet floors, and a great big red carpet spread on the gravel in front of . . ."

He did not finish. He swayed gently, and slithered on to the carpet. His fall was checked halfway by the side of the bed. As his head lay against the rumpled sheets, the overlying tan of his pallid cheeks had the greenish tinge of an old ivory.

Hardly had he reached the floor when Edmée, without uttering a sound, threw herself down beside him. With one hand she supported his drooping head, and with the other held a bottle of smelling-salts to his nostrils, from which the colour was visibly ebbing. But two enfeebled arms pushed her away.

"Leave me alone. . . . Can't you see I'm dying?"

He was not dying, however, and under Edmée's fingers his pulse retained its rhythm. He had spoken in a subdued whisper, with the glib, emphatic sincerity of very young would-be suicides who, at one and the same moment, both court death and fight shy of it.

His lips were parted over gleaming teeth and his breathing was regular; but he was in no haste to come right back to life. Safely ensconced behind his tightly shut eyes, he sought refuge in the heart of that green domain, so vivid in his imagination at the instant of his fainting fit—a flat domain, rich in strawberry-beds and bees, in pools of moonbeams fringed with warm stones. . . . After he regained his strength, he still kept his eyes shut, thinking 'If I open my eyes, Edmée will then see the picture in my mind.'

She remained on one knee, bending over him. She was looking after him efficiently, professionally. She reached out with her free hand, picked up a newspaper and used it to fan his forehead. She whispered insignificant but appropriate words, "It's the storm. . . . Relax. . . . No, don't try to move. . . . Wait till I slip this pillow under you. . . ."

He sat up again, smiling, and pressed her hand in thanks. His parched mouth longed for lemons or vinegar. The ringing of the telephone snatched Edmée away from him.

"Yes, yes. . . . What? Yes, of course I know it's ten. Yes. What?"

From the imperious brevity of her replies, Chéri knew that it was someone telephoning from the Hospital.

"Yes, of course I'm coming. What? In . . ." With a rapid glance she estimated Chéri's term of recovery. "In twenty-five minutes. Thanks. See you presently."

She opened the two glass doors of the French windows to their fullest extent, and a few peaceful drops of rain dripped into the room, bringing with them an insipid river smell.

"Are you better, Fred? What exactly did you feel? Nothing wrong with your heart, is there? You must be short of phosphates. It's the result of this ridiculous summer we're having. But what can you expect?"

She glanced at the telephone furtively, as she might at an onlooker.

Chéri stood up on his feet again without apparent effort. "Run along, child. You'll be late at your shop. I'm quite all right."

"A mild grog? A little hot tea?"

"Don't bother about me. . . . You've been very sweet. Yes, a little cup of tea—ask for it on your way out. And some lemon."

Five minutes later she was gone, after giving him a look, which she believed expressed solicitude only. She had searched in vain for a true sign, for some explanation of so inexplicable a state of affairs. As though the sound of the door shutting had severed his bonds, Chéri stretched himself and found that he felt light, cold, and empty. He hurried to the window and saw his wife crossing the small strip of garden, her head bowed under the rain. 'She's got a guilty back,' he pronounced, 'she's always had a guilty back. From the front, she looks a charming little lady. But her back gives the show away. She's lost a good half-hour by my having fainted. But "back to our muttons", as my mother would say. When I got married, Léa was fifty-one—at the very least—so Madame Peloux assures me. That would

make her fifty-eight now, sixty perhaps. . . . The same age as General Courbat? No! That's too rich a joke!

He tried his hardest to associate the picture of Léa at sixty with the white bristling moustache and crannied cheeks of General Courbat and his ancient cab-horse stance. 'It's the best joke out!'

The arrival of Madame Peloux found Chéri still given over to his latest pastime, pale, staring out at the drenched garden, and chewing a cigarette that had gone out. He showed no surprise at his mother's entrance, "You're certainly up with the lark, my dear mother."

"And you've got out of bed the wrong side, it would seem," was her rejoinder.

"Pure imagination. There are, at least, extenuating circumstances to account for your activity, I presume?"

She raised both eyes and shoulders in the direction of the ceiling. A cheeky little leather sports hat was pulled down like a vizor over her forehead.

"My poor child," she sighed, "if you only knew what I'm engaged on at this moment! If you knew what a gigantic task . . ."

He took careful stock of the wrinkles on his mother's face, the inverted commas round her mouth. He contemplated the small flabby wavelet of a double chin, the ebb and flow of which now covered, now uncovered, the collar of her mackintosh. He started to weigh up the fluctuating pouches under her eyes, repeating to himself: 'Fifty-eight . . . Sixty . . .'

"Do you know the task I've set myself? Do you know?" She waited a moment, opening wider her large eyes outlined by black pencil. "I'm going to revive the hot springs at Passy! *Les Thermes de Passy!* Yes, that means nothing to you, of course. The springs are there under the Rue Raynouard, only a few yards away. They're dormant; all they need is to be revived. Very active waters. If we go the right way about it, it will mean the ruination of Uriage, the collapse of Mont Dore, perhaps—but that would be too wonderful! Already I've made certain of the co-operation of twenty-seven Swiss doctors. Edmée and I have been getting to work on the Paris Municipal Council. . . ."

And that's exactly why I've come—I missed your wife by five minutes. . . . What's wrong with you? You're not listening to me. . . .”

He persisted in trying to relight his damp cigarette. He gave it up, threw the stub out upon the balcony, where large drops of rain were rebounding like grasshoppers; then he gravely looked his mother up and down.

“I am listening to you,” he said. “Even before you speak I know what you're going to say. I know all about this business of yours. It goes by the varying names of company promotion, wheezes, commissions, founders' shares, American blankets, bully-beef, etcetera. . . . You don't suppose I've been deaf or blind for the last year, do you? You are nasty, wicked women, that's all there is to it. I bear you no ill will.”

He stopped talking and sat down, by force of habit rubbing his fingers almost viciously over the little twin scars beneath his right breast. He looked out at the green, rain-battered garden, and on his relaxed features weariness battled with youth—weariness, hollowing his cheeks and darkening his eye-sockets, youth perfectly preserved in the ravishing curve and full ripeness of his lips, the downiness of his nostrils, and the raven-black abundance of his hair.

“Very well, then,” said Charlotte Peloux at length. “That's a nice thing to hear, I must say. The devil turned preacher! I seem to have given birth to a Censor of Public Morals.”

He showed no intention of breaking the silence, or of making any movement whatever.

“And by what high standards do you presume to judge this poor corrupt world? By your own honesty, I don't doubt!”

Buckled into a leather jerkin, like a yeoman of old, she was at the top of her form and ready for the fray. But Chéri appeared to be through with all fighting, now and for ever.

“By my honesty? . . . Perhaps. Had I been hunting for the right word, I should never have hit upon that. You yourself said it. Honesty will pass.”

She did not deign to reply, postponing her offensive until a later moment. She held her tongue that she might give her full attention to her son's peculiar new aspect. He was sitting with

his legs very wide apart, elbows on knees, his hands firmly locked together. He continued to stare out at the garden laid flat by the lashing rain, and after a moment he sighed without turning his head: "Do you really call this a life?"

As might be expected, she asked: "What life?"

He raised one arm, only to let it fall again. "Mine. Yours. Everything. All that's going on under our eyes."

Madame Peloux hesitated a moment. Then she threw off her leather coat, lit a cigarette, and she too sat down.

"Are you bored?"

Coaxed by the unusual sweetness of a voice that sounded ethereally solicitous, he became natural and almost confidential.

"Bored? No, I'm not bored. What makes you think I'm bored? I'm a trifle . . . what shall I say? . . . a trifle worried, that's all."

"About what?"

"About everything. Myself. . . . Even about you."

"I'm surprised at that."

"So am I. These fellows . . . this year . . . this peace." He stretched his fingers apart as though they were sticky or tangled in overlong hair.

"You say that as we used to say 'This war' . . ." She put a hand on his shoulder and tactfully lowered her voice. "What is the matter with you?"

He could not bear the questioning weight of this hand; he stood up, and began moving about in a haphazard way. "The matter is that everyone's rotten. No!" he begged, seeing an artificial look of indignation on the maternal countenance, "No, don't start all over again. No, present company *not* excluded. No, I do *not* accept the fact that we are living in splendid times, with a dawn of this, a resurrection of that. No, I am *not* angry, don't love you any less than before, and there is nothing wrong with my liver. But I do seriously think that I'm nearly at the end of my tether."

He cracked his fingers as he walked about the room, sniffing the sweet-smelling spray of the heavy rain as it splashed off the balcony. Charlotte Peloux threw down her hat and her red gloves, a gesture intended as a peace-offering.

"Do tell me exactly what you mean, child. We're alone." She smoothed back her sparse hennaed hair, cut boyishly short. Her mushroom-coloured garb held in her body as an iron hoop clamps a cask. 'A woman. . . . She has been a woman. . . . Fifty-eight. . . . Sixty. . . .' Chéri was thinking. She turned on him her lovely velvety eyes, brimming with maternal coquetry, the feminine power of which he had long forgotten. This sudden charm of his mother's warned him of the danger lying ahead, and the difficulty of the confession towards which she was leading him. But he felt empty and listless, tormented by what he lacked. The hope of shocking her drove him on still further.

"Yes," he said, in answer to his own question. "You have your blankets, your macaroni and spaghetti, your *légions d'honneur*. You joke about the meetings of the *Chambre des Députés* and the accident to young Lenoir. You are thrilled by Madame Caillaux, and by the hot springs at Passy. Edmée's got her shopful of wounded and her Physician-in-Charge. Desmond dabbles in dance-halls, wines and spirits, and white slavery. Filipesco bags cigars from Americans and hospitals, to hawk them round night clubs. Jean de Touzac . . . is in the surplus store racket. What a set! What . . ."

"You're forgetting Landru," Charlotte put in edgewise.

His eyes twinkled as he gave the slyest of winks, in silent tribute to the malicious humour that rejuvenated his old pugilist of a mother.

"Landru? That doesn't count, there's a pre-war flavour about that. There's nothing odd about Landru. But as for the rest—well . . . well, to cut it short, there's not one who's not a rotter and . . . and I don't like it. That's all."

"That's certainly short, but not very clear," Charlotte said, after a moment. "You've a nice opinion of us. Mind you, I don't say you're wrong. Myself, I've got the qualities of my defects, and nothing frightens me. Only, it doesn't give me an inkling of what you're really after."

Chéri swayed awkwardly on his chair. He frowned so furiously that the skin on his forehead contracted in deep wrinkles be-

tween his eyes, as though trying to keep a hat on his head in a gusty wind.

"What I'm really after . . . I simply don't know. I only wish people weren't such rotters. I mean to say, weren't *only* rotten. . . . Or, quite simply, I should like to be able not to notice it."

He showed such hesitancy, such a need of coming to terms with himself, that Charlotte made fun of it. "Why notice it, then?"

"Ah, well. . . . That's just the point, you see."

He gave her a helpless smile, and she noticed how much her son's face aged as he smiled. 'Someone ought constantly to be telling him hard-luck stories,' she said to herself, 'or else making him really angry. Gaiety doesn't improve his looks . . .' She blew out a cloud of smoke and in her turn allowed an ambiguous commonplace to escape her. "You didn't notice anything of that before."

He raised his head sharply. "Before? Before what?"

"Before the war, of course."

"Ah, yes . . ." he murmured, disappointed. "No, before the war, obviously. . . . But before the war I didn't look at things in the same way."

"Why?"

The simple word struck him dumb.

"I'll tell you what it is," Charlotte chid him, "you've turned honest."

"You wouldn't think of admitting, by any chance, that I've simply remained so?"

"No, no, don't let's get that wrong." She was arguing, a flush on her cheeks, with the fervour of a prophetess. "Your way of life before the war, after all—I'm putting myself in the position of people who are not exactly broad-minded and who take a superficial view of things, understand!—such a way of life, after all, has a name!"

"If you like," Chéri agreed. "What of it?"

"Well then, that implies a . . . a way of looking at things. Your point of view was a gigolo's."

"Quite possibly," said Chéri, unmoved. "Do you see any harm in that?"

"Certainly not," Charlotte protested, with the simplicity of a child. "But, you know, there's a right time for everything."

"Yes . . ." He sighed deeply, looking out towards a sky masked by cloud and rain. "There's a time to be young, and there's a time to be less young. There's a time to be happy . . . d'you think it needed you to make me aware of that?"

She seemed suddenly to be upset, and walked up and down the room, her round behind tightly moulded by her dress, as plump and brisk as a little fat bitch. She came back and planted herself in front of her son.

"Well, darling, I'm afraid you're heading for some act of madness."

"What?"

"Oh! there aren't so many. A monastery. Or a desert island. Or love."

Chéri smiled in astonishment. "Love? You want me . . . in love with . . ." He jerked his chin in the direction of Edmée's boudoir, and Charlotte's eyes sparkled.

"Who mentioned her?"

He laughed, and from an instinct of self-preservation became offensive again.

"*You* did, and in a moment you'll be offering me one of your American pieces."

She gave a theatrical start. "An American piece? Really? And why not a rubber substitute as provided for sailors into the bargain?"

He was pleased with her jingoistic and expert disdain. Since childhood he had had it dinned into him that a French woman demeans herself by living with a foreigner, unless, of course, she exploits him, or he ruins her. And he could reel off a list of outrageous epithets with which a native Parisian courtesan would brand a dissolute foreign woman. But he refused the offer, without irony. Charlotte threw out her short arms and protruded her lower lip, like a doctor confessing his helplessness.

"I don't suggest that you should work . . ." she risked shamefacedly.

Chéri dismissed this importunate suggestion with a shrug of the shoulders.

"Work," he repeated . . . "work, what you mean by that is hobnobbing with fellows. You can't work alone, short of painting picture post-cards or taking in sewing. My poor mother, you fail to realise that, if fellows get my goat, women can hardly be said to inspire me either. The truth is, that I have no further use for women at all," he finished courageously.

"Good heavens!" Charlotte caterwauled. She wrung her hands as though a horse had slipped and fallen at her feet; but harshly her son enjoined silence with a single gesture, and she was forced to admire the virile authority of this handsome young man, who had just owned up to his own particular brand of impotence.

"Chéri! . . . my little boy! . . ."

He turned to her with a gentle, empty, and vaguely pleading look in his eyes.

She gazed into the large eyes that shone with an exaggerated brilliance, due, perhaps, to their unblemished white, their long lashes and the secret emotion behind them. She longed to enter through these magnificent portals and reach down to the shadowed heart which had first started to beat so close to her own. Chéri appeared to be putting up no defence and to enjoy being balked, as if under hypnosis. Charlotte had, in the past, known her son to be ill, irritable, sly; she had never known him unhappy. She felt, therefore, a strange kind of excitement, the ecstasy that casts a woman at a man's feet at the moment when she dreams of changing a despairing stranger into an inferior stranger—that is to say, of making him rid himself of his despair.

"Listen, Chéri," she murmured very softly. "Listen. . . . You must . . . No, no, wait! At least let me speak. . . ."

He interrupted her with a furious shake of the head, and she saw it was useless to insist. It was she who broke their long exchange of looks, by putting on her coat again and her little leather hat, making towards the door. But as she passed the table, she stopped, and casually put her hand out towards the telephone.

"Do you mind, Chéri?"

He nodded his consent, and she began in a high-pitched nasal shrill like a clarinet. "Hullo . . . Hullo . . . Hullo . . . Passy, two nine, two nine. Hullo . . . Is that you, Léa? But of course it's me. What weather, eh! . . . Don't speak of it. Yes, very well. Everyone's very well. What are you doing to-day? Not budging an inch! Ah, that's so like you, you self-indulgent creature! Oh, you know, I'm no longer my own mistress. . . . Oh no, not on that account. Something altogether different. A vast undertaking. . . . Oh, no, not on the telephone. . . . You'll be in all day then? Good. That's very convenient. Thank you. Goodbye, Léa darling!"

She put back the receiver, showing nothing but the curve of her back. As she moved away, she inhaled and exhaled puffs of blue smoke, and vanished in the midst of her cloud like a magician whose task is accomplished.

Without hurrying, he climbed the single flight of stairs up to Léa's flat. At six in the evening, after the rain, the Rue Raynouard re-echoed, like the garden of a boarding-school, with the chirrup of birds and the cries of small children. He glanced quickly, coldly, at everything, refusing to be surprised at the heavy looking-glasses in the entrance-hall, the polished steps, the blue carpet, or the lift-cage lavishly splashed with as much lacquer and gold as a sedan-chair. On the landing he experienced, for a moment, the deceptive sense of detachment and freedom from pain felt by a sufferer on the dentist's doorstep. He nearly turned away, but, guessing that he might feel compelled to return later, he pressed the bell with a determined finger. The maid, who had taken her time in coming to the door, was young and dark, with a butterfly cap of fine lawn on her bobbed hair: her unfamiliar face took from Chéri his last chance of feeling moved.

"Is Madame at home?"

The young servant, apparently lost in admiration of him, could not make up her mind.

"I do not know, Monsieur. Is Monsieur expected?"

"Of course," he said, with a return of his old harshness.

She left him standing there, and disappeared. In the half-light,

he was quick to take in his surroundings, with eyes blurred by the gloom, and alert sensitive nostrils. There was nowhere a vestige of that light golden scent, and some ordinary pine essence sputtered in an electric scent-burner. Chéri felt put out, like someone who discovers that he is on the wrong floor. But a great peal of girlish laughter rang out, its notes running down a deep descending scale. It was muffled by some curtain or other, but at once the intruder was cast into a whirlpool of memories.

"Will Monsieur please come to the drawing-room."

He followed the white butterfly, saying over to himself as he went: "Léa's not alone. She's laughing. She can't be alone. So long as it's not my mother." Beyond an opened door, he was being welcomed by rosy pink daylight and he waited, standing there, for the rebirth of the world heralded by this dawn.

A woman was writing at a small table, facing away from him. Chéri was able to distinguish a broad back and the padded cushion of a fat neck beneath a head of thick grey vigorous hair, cut short like his mother's. 'So I was right, she's not alone. But who on earth can this good woman be?'

"And, at the same time, write down your masseur's address for me, Léa, and his name. You know what I'm like about names. . . ."

These words came from a woman dressed in black, also seated, and Chéri felt a preliminary tremor of expectation running through him: 'Then . . . where is Léa?'

The grey-haired lady turned round, and Chéri received the full impact of her blue eyes.

"Oh, good heavens, child—it's you!"

He went forward as in a dream, and kissed an outstretched hand.

"Monsieur Frédéric Peloux—Princess Cheniaguine."

Chéri bent over and kissed another hand, then took a seat.

"Is he your . . . ?" queried the lady in black, referring to him with as much freedom as if he had been a deafmute.

Once again the great peal of girlish laughter rang out, and Chéri sought for the source of this laugh here, there, and everywhere—anywhere but in the throat of the grey-haired woman.

"No, no, he isn't! Or rather, he isn't any longer, I should say. Valérie, come now, what are you thinking of?"

She was not monstrous, but huge, and loaded with exuberant buttresses of fat in every part of her body. Her arms, like rounded thighs, stood out from her hips on plump cushions of flesh just below her armpits. The plain skirt and the nondescript long jacket, opening on a linen blouse with a jabot, proclaimed that the wearer had abdicated, was no longer concerned to be a woman, and had acquired a kind of sexless dignity.

Léa was now standing between Chéri and the window, and he was not horrified at first by her firm, massive, almost cubic, bulk. When she moved to reach a chair, her features were revealed, and he began to implore her with silent entreaties, as though faced with an armed lunatic. Her cheeks were red and looked over-ripe, for she now disdained the use of powder, and when she laughed her mouth was packed with gold. A healthy old woman, in short, with sagging cheeks and a double chin, well able to carry her burden of flesh and freed from restraining stays.

"Tell me, child, where have you sprung from? I can't say I think you're looking particularly well."

She held out a box of cigarettes to Chéri, smiling at him from blue eyes which had grown smaller, and he was frightened to find her so direct in her approach, and as jovial as an old gentleman. She called him "child", and he turned away his eyes, as though she had let slip an indecent word. But he exhorted himself to be patient, in the vague hope that this first picture would give place to a shining transfiguration.

The two women looked him over calmly, sparing him neither goodwill nor curiosity.

"He's got rather a look of Hernandez . . ." said Valérie Chéniaquine.

"Oh, I don't see that at all," Léa protested. "Ten years ago perhaps . . . and, anyhow, Hernandez had a much more pronounced jaw!"

"Who's that?" Chéri asked, with something of an effort.

"A Peruvian who was killed in a motor accident about six

months ago," said Léa. "He was living with Maximilienne. It made her very unhappy."

"Didn't prevent her finding consolation," said Valérie.

"Like anyone else," Léa said. "You wouldn't have wished her to die of it, surely?"

She laughed afresh, and her merry blue eyes disappeared, lost behind wide cheeks bulging with laughter. Chéri turned away his head and looked at the woman in black. She had brown hair and an ample figure, vulgar and feline like thousands and thousands of women from the south. She seemed in disguise, so very carefully was she dressed as a woman in good society. Valérie was wearing what had long been the uniform of foreign princesses and their ladies—a black tailor-made of undistinguished cut, tight in the sleeve, with a blouse of extremely fine white batiste, showing signs of strain at the breast. The pearl buttons, the famous necklace, the high stiff whalebone collar, everything about Valérie was as royal as the name she legitimately bore. Like royalty, too, she wore stockings of medium quality, flat-heeled walking shoes and expensive gloves, embroidered in black and white.

From the cold and calculating way she looked him over, Chéri might have been a piece of furniture. She went on with her criticisms and comparisons at the top of her voice.

"Yes, yes, there is something of Hernandez, I promise you. But, to hear Maximilienne to-day, Hernandez might never have existed . . . now that she has made quite certain of her famous Amerigo. And yet! And yet! I know what I'm talking about. I've seen him, her precious Amerigo. I'm just back from Deauville. I saw the pair of them!"

"No! Do tell us!"

Léa sat down, overflowing the whole armchair. She had acquired a new trick of tossing back her thick grey hair; and at each shake of the head, Chéri saw a quivering of the lower part of her face, which looked like Louis XVI's. Ostensibly, she was giving Valérie her full attention, but several times Chéri noticed a mischievous faltering in one of the little shrunk blue eyes, as they sought to catch those of the unexpected visitor.

"Well, then," Valérie started on her story, "she had hidden him in a villa miles outside Deauville, at the back of beyond. But that did not suit Amerigo at all—as you will readily understand, Monsieur!—and he grumbled at Maximilienne. She was cross, and said: 'Ah! that's what the matter is—you want to be on view to the world and his wife, and so you shall be!' So she telephoned to reserve a table at the Normandy for the following evening. Everyone knew this an hour later, and so I booked a table as well, with Becq d'Ambez and Zahita. And we said to ourselves: 'We're going to be allowed to see this marvel at last!' On the stroke of nine there was Maximilienne, all in white and pearls, and Amerigo. . . . Oh, my dear, what a disappointment! Tall, yes, that goes without saying . . . in point of fact, rather too tall. You know what I always say about men who are too tall. I'm still waiting to be shown one, just one, who is well put together. Eyes, yes, eyes, I've got nothing to say against his eyes. But—from here to there, don't you see (she was pointing to her own face), from here to there, something about the cheeks which is too rounded, too soft, and the ears set too low. . . . Oh, a very great disappointment. And holding himself as stiff as a poker."

"You're exaggerating," said Léa. "The cheeks—well what about cheeks?—they aren't so very important. And, from here to there, well really it's beautiful, it's noble; the eyelashes, the bridge of the nose, the eyes, the whole thing is really too beautiful! I'll grant you the chin: that will quickly run to flesh. And the feet are too small, which is ridiculous in a boy of that height."

"No, there I don't agree with you. But I certainly noticed that the thigh was far too long in proportion to the leg, from here to there."

They went on to thrash out the question, weighing up, with a wealth of detail and point by point, every portion of the fore and hind quarters of this expensive animal.

'Judges of pedigree fat cattle,' Chéri thought. 'The right place for them is the Commissariats.'

"Speaking of proportions," Léa continued, "you'll never come across anything to touch Chéri. . . . You see, Chéri, you've

come at just the right moment. You ought to blush. Valérie, if you can remember what Chéri was like only six, or say seven years ago . . .”

“But certainly, of course, I remember clearly. And Monsieur has not changed so very much, after all. . . . And you were so proud of him!”

“No,” said Léa.

“You weren’t proud of him?”

“No,” said Léa with perfect calm, “I was in love with him.”

She manœuvred the whole of her considerable body in his direction, and let her gay glance rest upon Chéri, quite innocently. “It’s true I was in love with you, very much in love, too.”

He lowered his eyes, stupidly abashed before these two women, the stouter of whom had just proclaimed so serenely that she and he had been lovers. Yet at the same time the voluptuous and almost masculine tone of Léa’s voice besieged his memory, torturing him unbearably.

“You see, Valérie, how foolish a man can look when reminded of a love which no longer exists? Silly boy, it doesn’t upset me in the least to think about it. I love my past. I love my present. I’m not ashamed of what I’ve had, and I’m not sad because I have it no longer. Am I wrong, child?”

He uttered a cry, almost as if someone had trodden on his big toe. “No, no, of course not! The very reverse!”

“It’s charming to think you have remained such good friends,” said Valérie.

Chéri waited for Léa to explain that this was his first visit to her for five years, but she just gave a good-humoured laugh and winked with a knowing air. He felt more and more upset. He did not know how to protest, how to shout out loud that he laid no claim to the friendship of this colossal woman, with the cropped hair of an elderly ’cellist—that, had he but known, he would never have come upstairs, never crossed her threshold, set foot on her carpet, never collapsed in the cushioned armchair, in the depths of which he now lay defenceless and dumb.

“Well, I must be going,” Valérie said. “I don’t mean to wait for crush-hour in the Métro, I can tell you.”

She rose to face the strong light, and it was kind to her Roman features. They were so solidly constructed that the approach of her sixtieth year had left them unharmed: the cheeks were touched up in the old-fashioned way, with an even layer of white powder, and the lips with a red that was almost black and looked oily.

"Are you going home?" Léa asked.

"Of course I am. What d'you suppose my little skivvy would get up to if left to herself!"

"Are you still pleased with your new flat?"

"It's a dream! Especially since the iron bars were put across the windows. And I've had a steel grid fixed over the pantry fanlight, which I had forgotten about. With my electric bells and my burglar-alarms . . . Ouf! It's been long enough before I could feel at all safe!"

"And your old house?"

"Bolted and barred. Up for sale. And the pictures in store. My little entresol flat is a gem for the eighteen hundred francs it costs me. And no more servants looking like hired assassins. You remember those two footmen? The thought of them still gives me the creeps!"

"You took much too black a view, my dear."

"You can't realise, my poor friend, without having been through it all. Monsieur, delighted to have met you. . . . No, don't you move, Léa."

She enfolded them both in her velvety barbaric gaze, and was gone. Chéri followed her with his eyes until she reached the door, yet he lacked the courage to follow her example. He remained where he was, all but snuffed out by the conversation of these two women who had been speaking of him in the past tense, as though he were dead. But now Léa was coming back into the room, bursting with laughter. "Princess Chéniaquine! Sixty millions! and a widow!—and she's not in the least bit happy. If that can be called enjoying life, it's not my idea of it, you know!"

She clapped her hand on her thigh as if it were a horse's crupper.

"What's the matter with her?"

"Funk. Blue funk, that's all. She's not the sort of woman who knows how to carry such wealth. Cheniaguine left her everything. But one might say that it would have done her less harm if he'd taken her money instead of leaving her his. You heard what she said?"

She subsided into the depths of a well upholstered armchair, and Chéri hated to hear the gentle sigh of its cushions as they took the weight of her vast bulk. She ran the tip of her finger along the grooved moulding of the chair, blew away the few specks of dust, and her face fell.

"Ah! things are not at all what they were, not even servants. Eh?"

He felt that he had lost colour, and that the skin round his mouth was growing tighter, as during a severe frost. He fought back an overwhelming impulse to burst out in rancour mingled with entreaties. He longed to cry out loud: 'Stop! Show me your real self! Throw off your disguise! You must be somewhere behind it, since it's your voice I hear. Appear in your true colours! Arise as a creature reborn, with your hair newly hennaed this morning, your face freshly powdered: put on your long stays again, the blue dress with its delicate jabot, the scent like a meadow that was so much a part of you. In these new surroundings I search for it in vain! Leave all this behind, and come away to Passy—never mind the showers—Passy with its dogs and its birds, and in the Avenue Bugeaud we'll be sure to find Ernest polishing the brass bars on your front door.' He shut his eyes, utterly worn out.

"And now, my child, I'm going to tell you something for your own good. What you need is to have your urine tested. Your colour's shocking and you've got that pinched look round your lips—sure signs, both of them: you're not taking proper care of your kidneys."

Chéri opened his eyes again, and they took their fill of this placid epitome of disaster seated in front of him. Heroically he said: "D'you really think so? It's quite possible."

"You mean, it's certain. And then, you've not got enough

flesh on you. . . . It's no use telling me that the best fighting cocks are scraggy. You could do with a good ten pounds more on you."

"Give them to me," he said with a smile. But he found his cheeks singularly recalcitrant and opposed to smiling, almost as though his skin had stiffened with age.

Léa burst into a peal of happy laughter, and Chéri tasted a pleasure which he could not have borne for long; he listened again to its full and rounded tones, the very laugh which in the old days used to greet some outrageous impertinence on the part of the "naughty little boy".

"That I could well afford! I've certainly been putting on weight, haven't I? Eh? Look . . . here . . . would you believe it? . . . and again here!"

She lit a cigarette, exhaled a double jet of smoke through her nostrils, and shrugged her shoulders. "It's age!"

The word flew out of her mouth so lightly that it gave Chéri a sort of extravagant hope. 'Yes: she's only joking. In a flash she'll reappear as her real self.' For an instant she seemed to take in the meaning of the look he gave her.

"I've changed a lot, haven't I, child? Fortunately, it doesn't much matter. As for you, I don't like the look of you at all. . . . You've been fluttering your wings too much, as we used to say in the old days. Eh?"

He detested this new "Eh?" with which she peppered her sentences so freely. But he stiffened at each interrogation, and each time mastered his rising excitement, preferring to remain in ignorance of both its reason and its aim.

"I don't ask whether you have any troubles at home. In the first place, it's none of my business; and besides, I know your wife as if I were her mother."

He listened to the sound of her voice without paying much attention. He noticed, above all, that when she stopped smiling or laughing, she ceased to belong to any assignable sex. Despite her enormous breasts and crushing backside, she seemed by virtue of age altogether virile and happy in that state.

"And I know your wife to be thoroughly capable of making a man happy."

He was powerless to hide his inward laughter, and Léa quickly went on to say.

"What I said was 'a man', and not 'any man'. Here you are in my house, without a word of warning. You've not come, I take it, just to gaze into my beautiful eyes, eh?"

She turned on Chéri those once "beautiful blue eyes", now so diminished, marbled with tiny red veins, quizzical, neither kind nor unkind, alert and bright certainly, but . . . but where was now the limpid freshness that had laved their whites with palest blue? Where the contour of their orbs, with the roundness of fruit, breast, or hemisphere, and blue as a land watered by many a river?

Jestingly, he said, "Pooh! aren't you sharp! A real detective!" And it amazed him to find that he had fallen into such a care-free posture, with his legs crossed, like a handsome young man with bad manners. For inwardly he was watching his other self, hopelessly distracted and on his knees, waving his arms, baring his breast, and shrieking incoherently.

"I'm not a particularly stupid woman. But you must admit that you don't present me to-day with a very difficult problem!"

She drew in her chin and its lower folds spread over her neck: the kneeling ghost of his other self bowed its head like a man who has received a death-blow.

"You show every known sign of suffering from the disease of your generation. No, no, let me go on. Like all your soldier friends, you're looking everywhere for your paradise, eh! the paradise they owe you as a war hero: your own special Victory Parade, *your* youth, *your* lovely women. . . . They owe you all that and more, for they promised you everything, and, dear God, you deserved it. And what do you find? A decent ordinary life. So you go in for nostalgia, listlessness, disillusion and neurasthenia. Am I wrong?"

"No," said Chéri, for he was thinking that he would give his little finger to stop her talking.

Léa clapped him on the shoulder, letting her hand with its large rings rest there. As he bent his head down towards it, he could feel on his cheek the heat of this heavy hand.

"Oh!" Léa continued, raising her voice. "You're not the only

one! I've come across dozens of boys, since the war ended, exactly in your state of . . ."

"Where?" Chéri interrupted.

The suddenness of the interruption and its aggressive character put an end to Léa's parsonic eloquence. She withdrew her hand.

"They're to be met with everywhere, my child. Is it possible to be so vain? You seem to think you're unique because you find the post-war world insipid. Don't flatter yourself to that extent!"

She gave a low chuckle, and a toss to her sportive grey hair, and then a self-important smile like a judge who has a nice taste in wine. "And you do flatter yourself, you know, always imagining that you're the only one of your kind."

She took a step back and narrowed her gaze, adding, perhaps a little vindictively: "You were unique only for . . . for a time."

Behind this veiled but carefully chosen insult, Chéri discovered something of her femininity at last. He sat bolt upright, delighted to find himself suffering less acutely. But by this time Léa had reverted to her milk and honey.

"But you didn't come here to have that said about you. Did you make up your mind on the spur of the moment?"

"Yes," said Chéri.

He could have wished that this monosyllable might have been the last word between the two of them. Shyly, he let his gaze wander to all the things that surrounded Léa. From the nearest plate he took a dry cake shaped like a curved tile, and then put it back, convinced that it would turn to brick-red grit in his mouth were he to take a bite out of it. Léa noticed this action, and the painful way he swallowed his saliva.

"Tut, tut, so we're suffering from nerves, are we? Peeky chin, and dark lines under the eyes. That's a pretty state of affairs!"

He closed his eyes, and like a coward decided to listen and not look.

"Listen to me, child, I know a little restaurant in the Avenue des Gobelins. . . ."

He looked up at her, in the full hope that she was going

mad, that in this way he would be able to forgive her for both looking and behaving like an old woman.

"Yes, I know a little restaurant . . . Let me speak! Only, you must be quick, before the smart set and the newspapers take it into their heads to make it fashionable, and the good woman herself is replaced by a chef. She does all the cooking at present, and, my dear . . ." She brought thumb and forefinger together on the tip of her lips, and blew an imitation kiss. Chéri turned away to look out of the window, where the shadow thrown by a branch flicked at the steady shaft of sunlight, impatiently but at regular intervals, much as a bent reed or river-plant appears to strike at the ripples of a regularly flowing current.

"What an odd sort of conversation . . ." he ventured in strained tones.

"No more odd than your presence in my house," Léa snapped back at him.

With a wave of the hand he made it clear that he wanted peace, only peace, with as few words spoken as possible, and preferably none at all. He felt defeated in face of this elderly woman's boundless reserves of energy and appetite. Léa's quick blood was now rising and turning her bulging neck and her ears to purple. "She's got a crop like an old hen," he thought, with something of his old enjoyment of cruelty.

"And that's the truth!" she hurled at him excitedly. "You drag yourself round here, for all the world like an apparition, and when I do my best to find some way of putting things to rights, I who, when all's said and done, do happen to know you rather well . . ."

He smiled at her despondently, "And how in the world should she know me? When far shrewder people than she, and even than I myself . . ."

"A certain kind of sickness of the soul, my child, of disillusion, is just a question of stomach. Yes, yes, you may laugh!" He was not laughing, but she might well think he was. "Romanticism, nerves, distaste for life: stomach. The whole lot, simply stomach. Love itself! If one wished to be perfectly sincere, one

would have to admit there are two kinds of love—well-fed and ill-fed. The rest is pure fiction. If only I knew how to write, or to make speeches, my child, what things I could say about that! Oh, of course, it wouldn't be anything new, but I should know what I was talking about, and that would be a change from our present-day writers."

Something worse than this obsession with the kitchen was upsetting Chéri: the affectation, the false tone of voice, the almost studied joviality. He suspected Léa of putting on an act of hearty and sybaritic geniality, just as a fat actor, on the stage, plays "jovial" characters because he has developed a paunch.

As though defiantly, she rubbed her shiny, almost blotchy red nose with the back of her first finger, and fanned the upper part of her body with the aid of the two revers of her long jacket. In so doing, she was altogether too cheerfully inviting Chéri to sit in judgment on her appearance, and she even ran her hand through her thick grey locks as she shook them free of her head.

"Do you like my hair short?"

He deigned to reply only by a silent shake of the head, just like someone brushing aside an idle argument.

"Weren't you saying something just now about a little restaurant in the Avenue des Gobelins. . .?"

It was now her turn to brush aside an irrelevance. She was beginning to understand, and he could see from the quivering of her nostrils that at last she was piqued. His animal instincts, which had been shocked into dullness, were now on the alert and it was as though a weight had been lifted from his mind. He intended somehow to find a way past this shameless flesh, the greying curls and "merry friar" joviality, and reach the being concealed behind them, to whom he was coming back, as to the scene of a crime. He remained close to this buried treasure, burrowing towards it spontaneously. 'How in the world did old age come upon her? All of a sudden, on waking up one morning? or little by little? And this surplus fat, this extra *avoir-dupois*, under the weight of which armchairs groan? Was it some sudden shock that brought about this change and unsexed her? Could it,

perhaps, have been grief on my account?' But he asked these questions of no one but himself, and without voicing them. 'She is piqued. She's on the way to understanding me. She's just going to tell me. . . .'

He watched her rise to her feet, walk over to the bureau, and start to tidy the papers lying on the open hinged flap. He noticed that she was holding herself more upright than when he had first entered the room, and that, under his following eye, she straightened her back still more. He accepted the fact that she was really colossal, her body seeming to run absolutely straight from armpit to hip. Before turning round again to face Chéri, she arranged a white silk scarf tightly round her neck, despite the heat of the room. He heard her take a deep breath, before she came towards him with the slow rolling gait of a ponderous animal.

She smiled at him. "I am not doing my duty as a hostess, it would seem. It's not very polite to welcome someone by giving them advice, especially useless advice."

From under a fold of her white scarf peeped insinuatingly a twisting, coiling, resplendent string of pearls, which Chéri at once recognised.

Held captive beneath the translucent skin, the seven colours of the rainbow flickered with some secret fire of their own all over the surface of each precious sphere. Chéri recognised the pearl with a dimple, the slightly egg-shaped pearl, and the biggest pearl of the string, distinguishable by its unique pink. 'These pearls, these at least, are unchanged! They and I remain unchanged.'

"So you've still got your pearls," he said.

She was astonished by the foolish phrase, and looked as though she wanted to interpret it.

"Yes, in spite of the war. Are you thinking that I could, or should, have sold them? Why should I have sold them?"

"Or 'for whom'?" he answered jokingly, in a tired voice.

She could not restrain a rapid glance towards the bureau and its scattered papers; and Chéri, in his turn, felt he knew the thought behind it, guessing that it was aimed at some yellowish postcard-photograph, probably the frightened features of a beard-

less boy in uniform. Disdainfully, he considered this imaginary face and said to himself, 'That's none of my concern,' adding a moment later, 'But what is there here that does concern me?'

The agitation which he had brought in his heart was now excited by everything around him; everything added to it—the setting sun, the cries of insect-chasing swallows, and the ember-glowing shafts of light stabbing through the curtains. He remembered that Léa carried with her wherever she went this incandescent rose-pink, as the sea, on its ebb-tide, carries with it far out from shore the earthy smells of pastures and new-mown hay.

No word passed between them for a while, and they were kept in countenance by pretending to listen to the clear fresh notes of a child singing. Léa had not sat down again. Standing massively in front of him, she carried her irretrievable chin higher than before, and betrayed some vague distress by the frequent fluttering of her eyelids.

"Am I making you late? Have you to go out this evening? Do you want to dress?" The questions were abrupt, and forced Léa to look at Chéri.

"Dress? Good Lord, and in what do you wish me to dress? I *am* dressed—irrevocably—once and for all."

She laughed her incomparable laugh, starting on a high note and descending the scale by leaps of equal interval till she got to the deep musical reaches reserved for sobs and amorous moans. Chéri unconsciously raised a hand in supplication.

"Dressed for life, I tell you! And how convenient that is! Blouses, fine linen, and this uniform on top, and here I am in full fig. Equally ready for dinner either at Montagné's or somewhere modest, ready for the cinema, for bridge, or for a stroll in the Bois."

"And what about love—which you're forgetting to mention?"

"Oh, child!"

She blushed: and, though her face was dark with the chronic red of sufferers from arthritis, the blush could not be concealed. Chéri, after the first caddish satisfaction of having said something outrageous, was seized with shame and remorse at the sight of this maidenly reaction.

"I was only joking," he said, in some confusion. "Have I gone too far?"

"Of course not. But you know very well I have never cared for certain kinds of impropriety or for jokes that are not really funny."

She strove to control her voice, but her face revealed that she was hurt, and every coarsened feature gave signs of a distress that could perhaps be outraged modesty.

'Dear God, if she takes it into her head to cry!' and he imagined the catastrophic effect of tears coursing down each cheek into the single deep ravine near the mouth, and of her eyelids reddened by the salt of tears.

He hastened to intercept: "No, no, you mustn't think that! How could you! I never meant . . . Please, Léa. . . ."

From her quick reaction he realised suddenly that this was the first time he had spoken her name. Proud, as in the old days, of her self-control, she gently stopped him.

"Don't worry, child. I'm not offended. But I've only got you here for a few minutes, so don't spoil them by saying anything I shouldn't care to remember."

Her gentle tone left him cold, and her actual words seemed offensively tactful to him. 'Either she's lying, or she really has become the sort of person she pretends. Peace, purity, and the Lord knows what! She might as well wear a ring in her nose! Peace of heart, guzzling, and the cinema. . . . Lies, lies, all lies! She wants to make me think that women find growing old comfortable, positively enjoyable. How can she expect *me* to swallow that? Let her bore anyone else she likes with her fine talk about how cosy life is, and the little restaurants with the most delicious country dishes. I'm not having any! Before I could toddle, I knew all there is to know about reducing. I was *born* among ageing beauties! All my life I've watched them, my painted pixies, squabbling about their wrinkles, and, well into their fifties, scratching each other's eyes out over some wretched gigolo!'

"You sit there saying nothing, and I'm not used to it any more. I keep on thinking that there's something you want to say to me."

On her feet, separated from Chéri by an occasional table with a decanter and port glasses, she made no effort to defend herself against the severe inspection to which she was being subjected; but from the almost invisible tremors that passed over her body, Chéri noted the muscular effort required to keep in her spreading stomach. 'How many times must she have put on her full-length corset again, left it off, then valiantly put it on again, before abandoning it for ever? . . . How often of a morning must she have varied the shades of her face powder, rubbed a new rouge on her cheeks, massaged her neck with cold-cream and a small lump of ice tied up in a handkerchief, before becoming resigned to the varnished hide that now shines on her cheeks!' Impatience alone, perhaps, had made her tremble, yet this faint tremor led him to expect—so stubbornly blind was he to reality—some miraculous new blossoming, some complete metamorphosis.

"Why don't you say something?" Léa persisted.

Little by little she was losing her poise, though she was careful not to move. She was playing with her rope of large pearls, knotting and unknotting, round her big well-manicured and wrinkled fingers, their luminous, indescribably bedewed and everlasting lustre.

'Perhaps it's simply because she's frightened of me,' Chéri mused. 'A man who says nothing must always seem a bit cranky. She's thinking of Valérie Chéniaquine's terrors. If I put my hand out, would she scream for help? My poor Nounoune!' He lacked the courage to pronounce this name out loud, and, to protect himself from even a moment's sincerity, he spoke:

"What are you going to think of me?"

"It all depends," Léa answered guardedly. "At the moment you remind me of people who bring along a little box of cakes and leave it in the hall, saying to themselves: 'There'll be plenty of time to produce these later,' and then pick them up again when they go."

Reassured by the sound of their voices, she had begun to reason like the Léa of old, quick on the uptake, and as wily as a sharp-witted peasant. Chéri rose to his feet, walked round the table which separated him from Léa, and the daylight stream-

ing through the pink curtains struck him full in the face. This made it easy for her to compute the passage of days and years from his features, which were all of them in danger, though still intact. There was something about so secret a falling away to tempt her pity and trouble her memory, and perhaps extract from her the word or gesture that would precipitate Chéri into a frenzy of humiliation. As he stood there, a sacrifice to the light, with eyes lowered as if he were asleep, it seemed to him this was his last chance of extorting from her one last affront, one last prayer, one final act of homage.

Nothing happened, so he opened his eyes. Once more he had to accept the true picture—in the shape of his stalwart old friend, who, prudently keeping her distance, was bestowing on him a certain degree of benevolence from small and slightly suspicious blue eyes.

Disillusioned and bewildered, he looked all over the room for her, except in the very spot where she stood 'Where is she? Where is she? This old woman is hiding her from me. She's bored by me, and she's waiting for me to go, thinking it all an infernal nuisance, these crowding memories and this returning ghost. . . . But if by any chance I did ask for her help, if I beg her to give me back Léa . . .' Deep inside him, his kneeling double was still palpitating, like a body from which the life-blood is being drained. With an effort of which he would never have deemed himself capable, Chéri tore himself away from this tortured image.

"I must be going," he said out loud, and he added on a note of rather cheap wit, "and I'm taking my box of cakes with me."

Léa's exuberant bosom heaved with a sigh of relief. "As you like, my child. But I'm always here, you know, if you're in any little trouble."

Though she seemed so obliging, Chéri could sense an underlying resentment. Within that vast edifice of flesh crowned with silvery thatch, femininity had for a moment reasserted itself in tones resounding with an intelligent harmony. But Chéri could not respond: like a ghost he had come, and with the shyness of a ghost he must vanish, in his own despite.

"Of course," Chéri replied, "and I thank you."

From that moment on, he knew, unerringly and spontaneously, exactly how to manage his exit. All the right words sprang to his lips, fluently, mechanically.

"You do understand, don't you, I came here to-day . . . why not sooner, you may ask? I know I ought to have come a long while ago. . . . But you will forgive me. . . ."

"Of course," Léa said.

"I'm even more hare-brained than before the war, you know, so that . . ."

"I understand, I understand."

And because of this interruption, he thought that she must be impatient to see the last of him. A few words were exchanged during Chéri's retreat, in the intervals of bumping into some piece of furniture, crossing a strip of sunshine from the courtyard window—after the pink light in the drawing-room it seemed by comparison almost blue—kissing a puffy hand bulging with rings when it was raised to his lips. Another of Léa's laughs, which broke off abruptly half way down its usual scale, just like a fountain when the jet is turned off and the crest of the plume, suddenly bereft of its stem, falls back to earth in a myriad separate pearls. . . . The staircase seemed to glide away under Chéri's feet like a bridge connecting two dreams, and once more he was in the Rue Raynouard. Even the street was unfamiliar.

He noticed that the rosy tints of the sky were wonderfully reflected in the rain-filled gutters and on the blue backs of the low-skimming swallows. And now, because the evening was fresh, and because all the impressions he was bringing away with him were slipping back perfidiously into the recesses of his mind—there to assume their final shape and intensity—he came to believe that he had forgotten all about them, and he felt happy.

Only the sound of an old woman's bronchial cough, as she sat over her glass of *crème-de-menthe*, disturbed the peace of the bar room where the murmur of the Place de l'Opéra died away, as though muffled in an atmosphere too thick to carry any eddies of sound. Chéri ordered a long drink and mopped his brow:

this precaution was a carry-over from the days when he had been a little boy and sat listening to the babble of female voices, as, with Biblical gravity, they bandied such golden rules as: "If you want your milk of cucumber with real cucumber in it, you must make it yourself . . .", or "never rub the perspiration into your face when you're overheated, or the perspiration will get under your skin and ruin it."

The silence, and the emptiness of the bar, created an illusion of coolness, and at first Chéri was not conscious of the couple who, with heads bent close together across a narrow table, were lost in inaudible whisperings. After a few moments his attention was drawn to this unknown man and woman by an occasional hissing sibilant which rose above the main stream of their chatter, and by the exaggerated expressions on their faces. They looked like servants, underpaid, overworked, and patient.

He took a mouthful or two of the fizzy iced drink, leaned his head back against the yellow plush of the banquette, and was delighted to feel a slackening of the mental strain which, for the last fortnight, had been sapping his strength. The dead weight of the present had not accompanied him across the threshold of the bar, which was old-fashioned, with red walls, gilt festoons, plaster roses, and a large open hearth. The cloakroom attendant could be half-seen in her tiled kingdom, counting every stitch as she mended the linen, her white hair bowed beneath a green lamp.

A passer-by dropped in. He did not trespass upon the yellow room, but took his drink standing at the bar as though to be discreet, and left without a word. The Odol odour of the crème-de-menthe was the only thing distasteful to Chéri, and he frowned in the direction of the dim old woman. Under a black and battered soft hat, he could distinguish an old face, accentuated here and there by rouge, wrinkles, kohl, and puffiness—all jumbled together—rather like a pocket into which have been popped, higgledy-piggledy, handkerchief, keys, and loose change. A vulgar old face, in short—and commonplace in its vulgarity, characterised, if at all, only by the indifference natural to a savage or a prisoner. She coughed, opened her bag, blew her

nose vaguely, and replaced the seedy black reticule on the marble-topped table. It had an affinity with the hat, for it was made of the same black cracked taffeta, and equally out of fashion.

Chéri followed her every movement with an exaggerated repugnance; during the last two weeks he had been suffering, more than he could reasonably be expected to bear, from everything that was at once feminine and old. That reticule sprawling over the table almost drove him from the spot. He wanted to avert his eyes, but did nothing of the sort: they were riveted by a small sparkling arabesque, an unexpected brilliance fastened to the folds of the bag. His curiosity surprised him, but half a minute later he was still staring at the point of sparkling light, and his mind became an absolute blank. He was roused from his trance by a subconscious flash of triumphant certainty, and this gave him back the freedom to think and breathe. 'I know! It's the two capital L's interlaced!'

He enjoyed a moment of calm satisfaction, not unlike the sense of security on reaching a journey's end. He actually forgot the cropped hair on the nape of that neck, the vigorous grey locks, the big nondescript coat buttoned over a bulging stomach; he forgot the contralto notes of the peal of youthful laughter—everything that had dogged him so persistently for the past fortnight, that had deprived him of any appetite for food, any ability to feel that he was alone.

'It's too good to last!' he thought. So, with a brave effort, he returned to reality. He looked more carefully at the offending object, and was able to reel off: 'The two initials, set in little brilliants, which Léa had designed first for her suède bag, then for her dressing-table set of light tortoise-shell, and later for her writing-paper!' Not for a moment would he admit that the monogram on the bag might represent some other name.

He smiled ironically. 'Coincidence be blowed! I wasn't born yesterday! I came upon this bag by chance this evening, and to-morrow my wife will go and engage one of Léa's old footmen—again by chance. After that I shan't be able to go into a single restaurant, cinema, or tobacconist's without running up against

Léa at every turn. It's my own fault. I can't complain. I ought to have left her alone.'

He put some small change beside his glass, and got up before summoning the barman. He faced away from the old woman as he slipped between the two tables, holding himself in under his waistcoat, like a tomcat squeezing under a gate. This he managed so adroitly that the edge of his coat only just brushed against the glass of green *crème-de-menthe*. Murmuring an apology, he made a dash for the glass door, to escape into the fresh air beyond. Horrified, but not really in the least surprised, he heard a voice call out after him, "Chéri!"

He had feared—known indeed—that this was coming. He turned to find that there was nothing about the raddled old ruin to help him recall her name; but he made no second attempt to escape, realising that everything would be explained.

"Don't you recognise me? You don't? But how could you? More women were aged by the war than men were killed by it and that's a fact. All the same, it's not for me to complain; I didn't risk losing anyone in the war. . . . Eh! Chéri! . . ."

She laughed; and recognition was complete, for he saw that what he had taken for decrepitude was only poverty and natural indifference. Now that she was holding herself upright and laughing, she did not look more than her age—sixty or thereabouts—and the hand with which she sought Chéri's was certainly not that of a doddering old grandmother.

"The Pal!" Chéri murmured, almost in tones of admiration.

"Are you really pleased to see me?"

"Oh, yes. . . ."

He was not telling a lie. He was gaining assurance step by step and thinking, 'It's only her . . . Poor Old Pal . . . I'd begun to fear . . .'

"Will you have a glass of something, Pal?"

"Just a whisky and soda, my pretty. My! haven't you kept your looks!"

He swallowed the bitter compliment which she tossed to him from the peaceful fringes of old age.

"And decorated, too," she added out of pure politeness. "Oh!

I knew all about it, you may be sure! We all knew about it."

The ambiguous plural failed to wrest a smile from Chéri, and the Pal thought she had shocked him.

"When I say 'we', I'm speaking of those of us who were your real friends—Camille de La Berche, Léa, Rita, and me. You may be sure Charlotte would never have told me a word about it. As far as she's concerned, I don't exist. But—and I may as well say so—she doesn't exist for me, either." She stretched out across the table a pale hand that had long forgotten the light of day. "You must understand that Charlotte will never again be anything to me but the woman who contrived to get poor little Rita arrested and detained for twenty-four hours. . . . Poor Rita, who had never known a word of German. Was it Rita's fault, I ask you, if she happened to be Swiss?"

"I know, I know. I know the whole story," Chéri broke in precipitately.

The Pal raised her huge dark watery eyes towards him, full of inveterate complicity and a compassion that was always misplaced. "Poor kid," she sighed. "I understand you. Forgive me. Ah! you've certainly had your cross to bear!"

He questioned her with a look, no longer accustomed to the overstatements that added a rich funereal tone to the Pal's vocabulary, and he feared she might be going to talk to him about the war. But she was not thinking of the war. Perhaps she never had, for it is the concern of two generations only.

She went on to explain. "Yes, I was saying that to have such a mother must have been a heavy cross to bear for a son like you—for a boy, that's to say, with a blameless life, both before marriage and after! A nice, quiet boy and all that; not one to sow his wild oats all over the place, or to squander his inheritance."

She wagged her head, and bit by bit he began to piece together the past. He rediscovered her, though she had the mask of a ravaged tragedy queen. Her old age was without nobility, yet bore no signs of illness, no tell-tale trace that betrayed her addiction to opium. The drug is merciful to those unworthy of it.

"Have you quite given up the pipe?" asked Chéri sharply.

She raised a white untended hand. "What do you suppose? That kind of foolishness is all very well when you're not all on your own. In the days when I used to shock you young men, yes. . . . You remember when you used to come back at nights? Ah! you were very fond of that. . . . 'Dear old Pal,' you used to say to me, 'just let me have another little pipeful, and pack it well!' "

Without turning a hair, he accepted this humble flattery, as he might from an old retainer, who fibs in order to fawn. He smiled knowingly, and scrutinised the folds of black tulle round her neck, looking in the shadows under the faded hat for a necklace of large fake pearls.

Almost mechanically and sip by sip, he drank the whisky which had been put in front of him by mistake. He did not care for spirits as a rule, but this evening he enjoyed the whisky, for it helped him to smile easily and softened to his touch unpolished surfaces and rough materials; it enabled him to listen kindly to an old woman for whom the present did not exist. They met again on the further side of the superfluous war-years and the young, importunate dead: the Pal spanned the gap by throwing across to Chéri a bridge of names—names of old men who bore charmed lives, of old women revitalised for the struggle or turned to stone in their ultimate shape, never to alter again. She recounted in detail a hard-luck story of 1913, some unhappiness that had taken place before August, 1914, and something trembled in her voice when she spoke of La Loupiote—a woman now dead—"The very week of your wedding, dear boy! you see what a coincidence it was? the hand of Fate was upon us, indeed"—dead after four years of a pure and peaceful friendship.

"We slanged each other day in, day out, dear boy, but only in front of other people. Because, don't you see, it gave them the impression that we were 'a couple'. Who would have believed it, if we hadn't gone for each other hammer and tongs? So we called each other the most diabolical names, and the on-lookers chuckled: "Have you ever seen such a devoted pair?"

Dear boy, I'll tell you something else that will knock you flat—surely you must have heard about the will Massau was supposed to have made. . . .”

“What Massau?” Chéri asked, languidly.

“Oh, come. You knew him as well as you know yourself! The story of the will—so called—that he handed to Louise MacMillar. It was in 1909, and at the time I am speaking of, I was one of the Gérault pack, his pack of ‘faithful hounds’—and there were five of us he fed every evening at *La Belle Meunière* down at Nice; but on the Promenade des Anglais, you must remember, we only had eyes for you—dolled up in white like an English baby, and Léa all in white as well. . . . Ah! what a pair you made! You were the sensation—a miracle, straight from the hands of the Creator! Gérault used to tease Léa: ‘You’re far too *young*, girlie, and what’s worse you’re too proud. I shan’t take you on for fifteen or twenty years at least. . . .’ And to think that such a man had to be taken from us! Not a tear at his funeral that wasn’t genuine, the whole nation was in mourning. And now let me get on with the story of the will. . . .”

Chéri was deluged with a perfect flood of incidents, a tide of bygone regrets and harmless resurrections, all declaimed with the ease and rapidity of a professional mourner. The two of them formed a symmetrical pattern as they leaned towards each other. The Pal lowered her voice when she came to the dramatic passages, giving out a sudden laugh or exclamation; and he saw in one of the looking-glasses how closely they seemed to resemble the whispering couple whose place they had taken. He got up, finding it imperative to put an end to this resemblance. The barman imitated his movement, but from afar, like a discreet dog when its master comes to the end of a visit. “Ah! well . . . yes . . .” said the Pal, “well, I’ll finish the rest another time.”

“After the next war,” said Chéri, jokingly. “Tell me, those two capital letters. . . . Yes, the monogram in little brilliants. . . . It’s not yours, Pal?”

He pointed at the black bag with the tip of his forefinger, extending it slowly while withdrawing his body, as though the bag were alive.

"Nothing escapes you," the Pal said in admiration. "You're quite right. She gave it to me, of course. She said to me: 'Such bits of finery are far too frivolous for me nowadays!' She said: 'What the devil do you suppose I'd be doing with those mirrors and powder and things, when I've a great face like a country policeman's?' She made me laugh. . . ."

To stem the flood, Chéri pushed the change from his hundred-franc note towards the Pal. "For your taxi, Pal."

They went out on to the pavement by the tradesman's entrance, and Chéri saw from the fainter lamp-light that night was coming on.

"Have you not got your motor?"

"My motor? No. I walked; it does me good."

"Is your wife in the country?"

"No. Her Hospital keeps her in Paris."

The Pal nodded her invertebrate hat. "I know. She's a big-hearted woman. Her name's been put forward for a decoration, I understand from the Baroness."

"What?"

"Here, stop that taxi for me, dear boy, the closed one. . . . And Charlotte's going big guns in her support; she knows people round Clemenceau. It will make up a little for the story about Rita . . . a little, not very much. She's as black as Sin itself, is Charlotte, my boy."

He pushed her into the oven of the taxi, where she sank back and became enveloped in the shadow. She ceased to exist. It was as though he had never met her, now that he heard her voice no longer. He took stock of the night, filling his lungs with the dust-laden air that foretold another scorching day. He pictured, as in a dream, that he would wake up at home, among gardens watered every evening, among the scent of Spanish honeysuckle and the call of birds, resting alongside his wife's straight hips. . . . But the Pal's voice rose up from the depths of the taxi: "Two hundred and fourteen, Avenue de Villiers! Remember my address, Chéri! And you know that I often dine at the *Giraffe*, Avenue de Wagram, don't you, if ever you should want me. . . . You know, if ever you should be looking for me."

'That's really the limit,' thought Chéri, lengthening his step. '“If I should ever be looking for her.” I ask you! Next time I come across her, I'll turn round and walk the other way.'

Cooled off and calmer, he strode without effort along the *quais* as far as the Place de l'Alma, and from there took a taxi back to the Avenue Henri-Martin. The eastern sky was already burnished with dull copper-coloured tints, which seemed rather to betoken the setting of some planet than the dawn of a summer day. No clouds streaked the vault of the heavens, but a haze of particles hung heavy and motionless over Paris, and would presently flare up and smoulder with the sombre glow of red-hot metal. As dawn breaks, the dog-days drain great cities and their suburbs of the moist pinks, floral mauves and dewy blues that suffuse the sky above open country where plant life flourishes in profusion.

Nothing was stirring in the house when Chéri came to turn the tiny key in the lock. The flagged hall still smelt of the previous evening's dinner, and the cut branches of syringa, arranged by the armful in white vases tall enough to hide a man, filled the air with unbreathable poison. A stray grey cat slipped past him, stopped dead in the middle of the passage, and coldly inspected the intruder.

"Come here, little clerk of the Courts," Chéri called in a low voice. The cat glared at him almost insultingly and did not budge. Chéri remembered that no animal—no dog, horse or cat—had ever shown him any signs of affection. He could hear, across a span of fifteen years, Aldonza's raucous voice prophesying: 'A curse lies on those from whom animals turn away.' But when the cat, now wide awake, began to play with a small green chestnut, bowling it along with its front paw, Chéri smiled and went on up to his room.

He found it as dark and blue as a stage night. The dawn penetrated no further than the balcony, bedecked with well trained roses and pelargoniums fastened with raffia. Edmée was asleep, her bare arms and toes peeping out from under a light blanket. She was lying on her side, her head inclined, one finger hooked through her pearls. In the half-light she seemed to be immersed in thought rather than sleep. Her wavy hair strayed

over her cheek, and Chéri could hear no sound of her breathing.

'She's enjoying a peaceful sleep,' thought Chéri. 'She's dreaming of Doctor Arnaud, or the Legion of Honour, or Royal Dutch shares. She's pretty. How pretty she is! . . . "Don't you worry, only another two or three hours, and you'll go to find your Doctor Arnaud. That's not so bad, is it? You'll meet again in the Avenue de l'Italie, in your beloved joint with its stink of carbolic. You'll answer 'Yes, Doctor; No, Doctor,' like a good little girl. You'll both of you put on really serious expressions; you'll jiggle with thermometers—ninety-nine point six, a hundred and two point four—and he'll take your small carbolicky paw in his great coal-tarry mitt. You're lucky, my girl, to have a romance in your life! Don't worry. I shan't deprive you of it. . . .'" I wouldn't mind, myself. . . .'

All of a sudden Edmée woke up with such a start that Chéri caught his breath, as though rudely interrupted in the middle of a sentence.

"It's you! It's you! Why, it *is* you after all."

"If you were expecting someone else, I offer my apologies," said Chéri, smiling at her.

"That's very clever. . . ." She sat up in bed and tossed back her hair. "What time is it? Are you getting up? Oh no, I see you've not been to bed yet. . . . You've just come in. . . . Oh, Fred! What have you been up to this time?"

"'This time' is a compliment. . . . If you only knew what I've been doing. . . ."

She was no longer at the stage where, hands over her ears, she besought him, "No, no! say nothing! Don't tell me!" But, faster than his wife, Chéri was leaving behind that childishly malicious period when, amidst floods of tears and stormy scenes which ended by her throwing herself into his arms in the early hours of the morning, he would draw her down with him into the deep sleep of reconciled antagonists. No more little games of that sort. . . . No more betrayals. . . . Nothing, now, but this enforced and unavowable chastity.

He chucked his dusty shoes to the other end of the room, and sat down on the soft lace-frilled sheets, offering his wife a pallid face accustomed to dissemble everything except his

will to dissemble. "Smell me!" he said. "Come on! I've been drinking whisky."

She brought her charming mouth to his, putting a hand on her husband's shoulder. "Whisky . . ." she repeated wonderingly. "Whisky . . . why?"

A less sophisticated woman would have asked "With whom?" and her cunning did not pass unnoticed. Chéri showed that two could play at that game by answering, "With an old pal. Do you want to hear the whole truth?"

She smiled, now caught in the dawning light which, with growing boldness, touched the edge of the bed, the looking-glass, a picture-frame, and then the golden scales of a fish swimming round and round in a crystal bowl.

"No, Fred, not the whole truth. Only a half-veiled truth, suitable for the small hours." At the same time, her thoughts were busy. She was certain—or nearly so—that Chéri had not been drawn away from her either by love or by lust. She let her acquiescent body fall helplessly into his arms, yet he felt on his shoulder a thin, hard hand, unrelaxed in its guarded prudence.

"The truth is," he went on, "that I don't know her name. But I gave her . . . wait a moment . . . I gave her eighty-three francs."

"Just like that, all at once! The first time you met her? It's princely!"

She pretended to yawn, and slipped softly back into the depths of the bed, as though not expecting an answer. He gave her a moment's pity; then a brilliant horizontal ray brought into sharper relief the almost naked body lying beside him, and his pity vanished.

'She's . . . she has kept her good looks. It's not fair.'

She lay back, her lips parted, looking at him through half-closed eyes. He saw a gleam of the candid, calculating, uncharacteristically feminine expression that a woman bestows on the man who is going to pleasure her, and it shocked his unavowable chastity. From his superior position he returned this look with another—the uncommunicative, enigmatic look of the man who

prefers to abstain. Not wishing to move away, he simply looked towards the golden daylight, the freshness of the watered garden, and the blackbirds, weaving liquid sequences of sound round the dry incessant chirps of the sparrows. Edmée could see signs of emaciation and prolonged fatigue on his features. His cheeks were blue with a day's growth of beard. She noticed that his fine hands were not clean, that his finger-nails had not been near soap and water since the previous evening, and that the dark lines which accentuated the hollows under his eyes were now spreading, in the shape of crow's feet, towards his nose. This handsome young man—she decided—without collar or shoes, looked ravaged, as if he had had to spend a night in prison. Without losing his looks, he had shrunk in accordance with some mysterious scaling down, and this enabled her to regain the upper hand. She no longer invited him to join her, sat up in bed, and put a hand on his forehead.

"Ill?"

Slowly he let his attention wander back from the garden to his wife.

"What? . . . No, no, nothing's wrong with me, except I'm sleepy. So sleepy that I can hardly bring myself to go to bed—if you know what I mean. . . ."

He smiled, showing dry gums and lips colourless on the insides. But, above all, this smile betrayed a sadness that sought no remedy, modest as a poor man's suffering. Edmée was on the point of questioning him categorically, but then thought better of it.

"Get into bed," she ordered, making room for him.

"Bed? It's water I need. I feel so filthy, I can't tell you."

He just had the strength to lift up a water bottle, take a gulp from the neck, then throw off his coat, before he fell back like a log on the bed, and lay there without moving again, drained by sleep.

For some little time Edmée gazed at the half-stripped stranger lying like a drugged man beside her. Her watchful eye wandered from bluish lips to hollowed eyes, from outflung hand to forehead sealed upon a single secret. She summoned her self-control

and composed her features, as though afraid the sleeper might take her by surprise. She got out of bed softly, and, before shutting out the dazzling sunlight, drew a silk counterpane to hide the outstretched untidy body looking like a burglar who had been knocked out. She arranged this so as to give the beautiful rigid features their full splendour, carefully pulling it down over the drooping hand with a slight qualm of pious disgust, as though hiding a weapon that perhaps had killed.

He never twitched a muscle—having retired for a few moments within an impregnable fastness. In any case, Edmée's hospital training had given her fingers a professional touch, which, if not exactly gentle, was competent to go straight to the required spot without touching or in any way affecting the surrounding area. She did not get back into bed; but, sitting half-naked, enjoyed the unexpected freshness of the hour when the sun rouses the winds. The long curtains stirred, as if breathing and, dependent on the breeze, stippled Chéri's sleep with fitful flecks of dark blue.

As she gazed at him, Edmée was not thinking of the wounded, or of the dead, whose peasant hands she had joined together upon coarse cotton sheets. No invalid in the grip of a nightmare, not one among the dead, had ever resembled Chéri: sleep, silence, and repose made him magnificently inhuman.

Extreme beauty arouses no sympathy. It is not the prerogative of any one country. Time's finger had touched Chéri only to make him more austere. The mind—whose task it is to curb the splendour of mankind while degrading it piecemeal—respected Chéri as an admirable temple dedicated to instinct. What could avail the Machiavellian deceit, the ardour and the cunning self-sacrifice imposed by love, against this inviolable standard-bearer of light and his untutored majesty?

Patient and, on occasion, subtle as she was, it never occurred to Edmée that the feminine appetite for possession tends to emasculate every living conquest, and can reduce a magnificent but inferior male to the status of a courtesan. Her lower-middle-class wisdom made her determined not to relinquish the gains—money, ease, domestic tyranny, marriage—acquired in so few years and rendered doubly attractive by the war.

She gazed at the limp, worn-out, almost empty-looking body. 'That's Chéri,' she said to herself; 'yes, that's Chéri all right . . . That's how small a thing he is!' She shrugged a shoulder and added: 'That's what he's reduced to, this wonderful Chéri of theirs . . .' doing her best to induce contempt for the man lying thus supine. She called up memories of rapturous nights, of languid early mornings bathed in sunlight and pleasure, and, as a result—since he had progressively grown to disdain her—she saw fit to pay but coldly vindictive homage to this body so sumptuously laid out under the pall of flowered silk and the refreshing wing of the curtains. She put one hand on the small, pointed breast set low on her slender body, and squeezed it like a pulpy fruit, as if calling this most tempting allurements of her young body to witness the injustice of his desertion. 'What Chéri himself needs is doubtless something else. What he needs is . . .'

But vain were her attempts to put her scorn into words. Even a woman loses the desire and the ability to despise a man who suffers in silence and alone.

All of a sudden, Edmée felt satiated with the spectacle: the shadows thrown by the curtains, the pallor of the sleeper, and the white bed helped to invest it with the romantic colouring of death and the nether world. She jumped to her feet, strong and ready to face this world, but determined to avoid any emotional attack upon the traitor lying on the disordered bed, the absentee seeking refuge in sleep, silent, ailing and repulsive. She was neither irritated nor unhappy. Her heart would beat more feverishly in her breast, the blood mount more quickly to her pearl-pale cheeks, only at the thought of the healthy red-haired man whom she called "dear master" or "chief" in tones of serious playfulness. Arnaud's thick gentle hands; his laugh; the points of light that sunshine or the lamp in the operating-theatre caused to twinkle on his red moustache; his very coat—the white surgery-coat he wore and even took off in the hospital, just like an intimate garment that never passes beyond the bedroom door. . . . Edmée sprang up as though for a dance.

'That, oh yes, *that's* my life!' She gave a toss of the head that

sent her hair flying out like a horse's mane, and went into the bathroom without turning round.

Unimaginative in style, and in its very ordinary proportions, the dining-room made no pretence to luxury except in the panels of yellow stuff starred with purple and green. The grey and white stucco of the surrounding walls deflected too much light on the guests, deprived already of all shade by the merciless glare of the top lighting.

A galaxy of crystal sequins shimmered with every movement of Edmée's dress. For the family dinner, Madame Peloux was still wearing her tailor-made with leather buttons, and Camille de La Berche her nurse's veil, under the cowl of which she bore a striking resemblance to Dante, only far hairier. Because it was so hot, the women spoke little: so did Chéri, because it was his habit. A warm bath followed by a cold shower had triumphed over his fatigue; but the powerful light, ricocheting upon his cheeks, accentuated their cavities, and he kept his eyes lowered, to allow the shadow from his eyebrows to fall directly over the lids.

• "To-night, Chéri doesn't look a day over sixteen," boomed the deep bass of the Baroness out of the blue.

No one took up her remark, and Chéri acknowledged it with a slight bow.

"Not for a long time," the Baroness continued, "have I seen the oval of his face so slender."

Edmée frowned imperceptibly. "I have. During the war, of course."

"That's true, that's true," piped Charlotte Peloux in shrill agreement. "Heavens! how worn out he looked in 1916, at Vésoul! Edmée, my dear child," she went on in the same breath, "I've seen you-know-who to-day, and *everything* is going along very nicely. . . ."

Edmée blushed in a docile, unbecoming manner, and Chéri raised his eyes. "You've seen who? And what's going along nicely?"

"Trousellier's pension—my little soldier who's had his right

arm off. He left the Hospital on June the twentieth. Your mother's taking up his case at the War Office."

She had not hesitated for words, and she let her calm golden gaze rest on Chéri: yet he knew she was lying.

"It's a question of whether he'll get his red riband. After all, poor boy, it's certainly his turn. . . ."

She was lying to him in front of two friends who knew that she was lying. 'Why don't I pick up the water-bottle and crash it down in the middle of them?' But he made no movement. What strength of feeling would have given him the impetus to brace his body and direct his hand?

"Abzac is leaving us in a week's time," began Madame de La Berche.

"That's not certain," Edmée took her up with an air of knowing better. "Doctor Arnaud isn't at all satisfied that he should be allowed to go off like that on his new leg. You can just see the man, liable to do any sort of silly thing, and always with the possibility of gangrene. Doctor Arnaud knows only too well that it was exactly that sort of thing, all through the war. . . ."

Chéri looked at her, and she stopped abruptly in the middle of her pointless sentence. She was fanning herself with a rose on a leafy stalk. She waved away a dish which she was offered, and put her elbows on the table. In her white dress and bare shoulders, even when sitting still, she was not exempt from a secret contentment, a self-satisfaction, which revealed her true nature. Something outrageous radiated from her soft outlines. Some tell-tale glow betrayed the woman bent on "arriving", who up till the present had met only with success.

'Edmée,' Chéri concluded, 'is a woman who should never grow older than twenty. How like her mother she's getting!'

The next moment the resemblance had vanished. Nothing obvious about Edmée recalled Marie-Laure: only in one respect did her daughter exhibit something of the poisonous, pink and white, impudent beauty exploited by the red-haired Marie-Laure to ensnare her victims during her palmy days—and that was in her shamelessness. Careful as she was not to shock anyone,

those who still retained their native shrewdness, by instinct or from lack of education, were shocked by her all the same, as if by a second-rate race-horse, or a jewel that looked too new. The servants, as well as Chéri, were frightened of something in Edmée, whom they guessed to be more vulgar than themselves.

Authorised by Edmée, who was lighting a cigarette, the Baroness de La Berche slowly grilled the tip of her cigar before inhaling the first rapturous puff. Her white Red Cross veil fell over her manly shoulders and she looked like one of those grave-faced men who, at Christmas parties, adorn their heads with tissue paper Phrygian caps, programme-sellers' kerchiefs, or shakos. Charlotte undid the plaited leather buttons of her jacket and drew towards her a box of Abdullas; while the butler, mindful of the customs of the house, pushed within easy reach of Chéri a small conjuror's table on wheels—full of secret drawers, sliding double-bottomed compartments, and liqueurs in silver phials. Then he left the room; and there was no longer against the yellow panels the tall silhouette of an elderly Italian with a face carved out of box-wood, and crowned with white hair.

"Old● Giacomo really does look an aristocrat," said the Baroness de La Berche, "and I know what I'm talking about."

Madame Peloux shrugged her shoulders, a movement that had long since ceased to lift her breasts. Her white silk blouse with a jabot sagged under the weight of her bosom, and her short, dyed, but still abundant hair glowed a livid red above large disastrous eyes and high forehead, suggesting a leader of the French Revolution.

"He's got the distinguished looks of all elderly Italians with white hair. They're all Papal Chamberlains, by the look of them, and they can write out the menu for you in Latin; but you've only to open a door and you'll find them raping a little girl of seven."

Chéri welcomed this outburst of virulence as a timely shower. His mother's malice had parted the clouds again, bringing back an atmosphere in which he could breathe. Not so long ago he had begun to enjoy discovering traces of the old Charlotte, who, from the safety of her balcony, would refer to a pretty woman

passing below as "a tuppenny-ha'penny tart," and who, to Chéri's "Do you know her, then?" would reply, "No! Whatever next! Do you expect me to know that slut?" Only recently had he begun to take a confused pleasure in Charlotte's superior vitality, and, confusedly, he now preferred her to the other two creatures present; but he was unaware that this preference, this partiality, could perhaps be termed filial affection. He laughed, and applauded Madame Peloux for still being—and quite startlingly so—the woman he had known, detested, feared, and insulted. For an instant, Madame Peloux took on her authentic character in her son's eyes; that is to say, he estimated her at her proper value, a woman high-spirited, all-consuming, calculating and at the same time rash, like a high financier; a woman capable of taking a humorist's delight in spiteful cruelty. "She's a scourge, certainly," he said to himself, "and no more. A scourge, but not a stranger." Looking at the way the points of her hair impinged upon her Jacobin forehead, he recognised a similarity to the blue-black jutting points on his own forehead, which emphasised the whiteness of his skin and the blackbird sheen of his hair.

'She's my mother all right,' he thought. 'No one's ever told me I'm like her, but I am.' The "stranger" was sitting opposite, glimmering with the milky, veiled brilliance of a pearl. Chéri heard the name of the Duchess of Camastra thrown out by the deep voice of the Baroness, and on the stranger's face he saw a fleeting rapacity flicker and die, like the serpent of flame that suddenly flares up along a burnt vine-twigg before it is consumed among the embers. But she did not open her mouth, and took no part in the volley of military curses which the Baroness was firing at a hospital-rival.

"They're properly in the soup, it appears, over some new-fangled injection or other. Two men died within two days of being given the needle. That needs some explaining!" said Madame de La Berche with a hearty laugh.

"You've got it wrong," corrected Edmée dryly. "That's an old story of Janson-de-Sailly resuscitated."

"No smoke without fire," sighed Charlotte charitably. "Chéri, are you sleepy?"

He was dropping with fatigue, but he admired the powers of resistance of these three women: neither hard work, the Parisian summer, nor perpetual movement and jabber could put them out of action.

"The heat," he murmured laconically. He caught Edmée's eye, but she made no comment and refrained from contradicting him.

"Pooh, pooh, pooh," chanted Charlotte. "The heat! But, of course. . . . Pooh, pooh, pooh."

Her eyes, which remained fixed on Chéri's, overflowed with blackmailing tenderness and complicity. As usual, she knew everything there was to be known: back-stairs gossip, concierges' chatter. Perhaps Léa herself, for the pleasure of a feminine fib, of winning one last trick, had told Charlotte. The Baroness de La Berche emitted a little neigh, and the shadow of her large clerical nose covered the lower part of her face.

"God in Heaven!" swore Chéri.

His chair fell to the floor behind him, and Edmée, alert and on the watch, promptly jumped to her feet. She showed not the slightest astonishment. Charlotte Peloux and the Baroness de La Berche at once put themselves on the defensive, but in the old-fashioned way—hands clutching skirts, ready to gather them up and fly. Chéri, leaning forward with his fists on the table, was panting and turning his head to right and left, like a wild animal caught in a net.

"You, to start with, you . . ." he stammered. He pointed at Charlotte; used as she was to such scenes, she was galvanised by this filial threat in the presence of witnesses.

"What? What? What?" he barked in sharp little yelps. "You dare to insult me? a little whippersnapper like you, a wretched little whippersnapper who, were I to open my mouth . . ."

The wine-glasses quivered at the sound of her piercing voice, but her words were cut short by a shriller voice: "Leave him alone!"

After three such abrupt explosions the silence seemed deafening, and Chéri, his physical dignity restored, shook himself, and a smile spread over his green face.

"I beg your pardon, Madame Peloux," he said mischievously. She was already conferring blessings on him with eye and

hand, like a champion in the ring, pacified at the end of a round.

"You're hot-blooded and no mistake!"

"He's a soldier all right," said the Baroness, as she shook hands with Edmée. "I must say goodbye, Chéri; they'll be missing me in my dug-out."

She refused a lift in Charlotte's motor, and insisted on going home on foot. The tall figure, the white nurse's veil, and the glow of her cigar would strike terror at night into the heart of the fiercest footpad. Edmée accompanied the two old women as far as the front door, an exceptional act of courtesy, which allowed Chéri time to draw what conclusions he could from his wife's wary action and her diplomatic peacemaking.

He drank a glass of cold water very slowly, as he stood beneath the cataract of light, thinking the matter over and savouring his terrible loneliness.

'She defended me,' he kept repeating to himself. 'She defended me with no love in her heart. She protected me as she protects the garden against blackbirds, her store of sugar against thieving nurses, or her cellar against the footmen. Little doubt she knows that I went to the Rue Raynouard, and came back here, never to go there again. She's not said a word about it to me, in any case—perhaps because she doesn't care. She protected me, because it wouldn't have done for my mother to talk. She defended me with no love in her heart.'

He heard Edmée's voice in the garden. She was testing his mood from afar. "You don't feel ill, Fred, do you? Would you like to go straight to bed?"

She put her head through the half-open door, and he laughed bitterly to himself: 'How cautious she's being.'

She saw his smile and grew bolder. "Come along, Fred. I believe I'm just as tired as you, or I wouldn't have let myself go just now. I've been apologising to your mother."

She switched off some of the cruel light, and gathered the roses from the tablecloth to put them into water. Her body, her hands, her head bending over the roses and set off by a haze of fair hair from which the heat had taken most of the crimp—everything about her might have charmed a man.

"I said *a man*—I didn't say *any man*," Léa's insidious voice kept ringing in Chéri's ears.

'I can behave as I like to her,' he thought, as he followed Edmée with his eyes. 'She'll never complain, she'll never divorce me; I've nothing to fear from her, not even love. I should be happy enough, if I chose.'

But, at the same time, he recoiled with unspeakable repugnance from the idea of the two of them living together in a home where love no longer held sway. His childhood as a bastard, his long adolescence as a ward, had taught him that his world, though people thought of it as reckless, was governed by a code almost as narrow-minded as middle-class prejudice. In it, Chéri had learned that love is a question of money, infidelity, betrayals, and cowardly resignation. But now he was well on the way to forgetting the rules he had been taught, and to be repelled by acts of silent condescension.

He therefore ignored the gentle hand on his sleeve. And, as he walked with Edmée towards the room whence would issue no sound of endearment or reproach, he was overcome with shame, and blushed at the horror of their unspoken agreement.

He found himself out of doors, dressed for the street and hardly conscious of having put on his soft hat and light raincoat. Behind him lay the drawing-room, misty with tobacco smoke; the overpowering scent of women and flowers; the cyanide smell of cherry brandy. There he had left Edmée, Doctor Arnaud, Filipesco, Atkins, and the two Kelekian girls, well-connected young women who, having done a little mild lorry-driving during the war, had no use now for anything but cigars, motors, and their garage-hand friends. He had left Desmond sitting between a real estate merchant and an Under-Secretary in the Ministry of Commerce, together with an invalided poet and Charlotte Peloux. Also a fashionable young married couple, who had obviously been put wise. Throughout dinner they had looked greedy but prudish, with a knowing expression and a simple-minded eagerness to be shocked—as though expecting Chéri to dance stark naked, or Charlotte and the Under-Secretary to make violent love to one another in the middle of the carpet.

Chéri had made off, aware that his behaviour had been stoical, with no other lapse than a sudden loss of interest in the present: an awkward thing to lose in the middle of a meal. Even so, his trance could have lasted little more than a moment, had been instantaneous, like a dream. But now he was putting a distance between himself and the strangers who thronged his house, and the sound of his footfall on the sand was as light as the soft padding of an animal. His light silver-grey coat shaded into the mist that had fallen over the Bois; and a few nocturnal loiterers must have envied a young man who was in such a hurry to go nowhere in particular.

He was haunted by the vision of his crowded house. He could still hear the sound of voices, and carried with him the memory of faces, of smiles, and especially of the shape of mouths. An elderly man had talked about the war; a woman about politics. He remembered, too, the new understanding between Desmond and Edmée, and the interest his wife had taken in some building scheme. 'Desmond! . . . Just the husband for my wife!' And then, dancing . . . the strange effect of the tango on Charlotte Peloux. Chéri quickened his step.

The night was filled with the damp mist of a too early autumn and the full moon was shrouded. A great milky halo, ringed with a pallid iridescence, had replaced the planet, and was sometimes itself hidden by fitful puffs of scudding cloud. The smell of September was already in the leaves that had fallen during the dog days.

'How mild it is,' Chéri thought.

He rested his weary limbs on a bench, but not for long. He was rejoined by an invisible companion, to whom he refused his seat on the bench—a woman with grey hair, wearing a long coat, who poured forth a relentless gaiety. Chéri turned his head towards the gardens of La Muette, as though he could hear, even at that distance, the cymbals of the jazz-band.

The time had not yet come for him to go back to the blue room, where perhaps the two society girls were still smoking good cigars, as they sat side-saddle on the blue velvet of the bed, keeping the real estate merchant amused with mess-room tales.

'Oh! for a nice hotel bedroom, a jolly pink room, very ordinary and very pink . . .' But would it not lose its very ordinariness the moment the light was turned out and total darkness gave the right of entry—a ponderous, mocking entry—to a figure with vigorous grey hair, dressed in a long, nondescript coat? He smiled at the intruder, for he was past the stage of fear. 'There, or in any other place, *she* will be just as faithful. But I simply can't go on living with those people.'

Day by day, hour by hour, he was becoming more scornful, more exacting. Already he was severely critical of the Agony Column heroes, and young war widows who clamoured for new husbands, like the parched for cold water. His uncompromising intolerance extended to the world of finance, without his realising how grave was the change. 'That Company for transporting raw hides they talked about at dinner. . . . How disgusting it was! And they don't mind discussing it at the top of their voices. . . .' But nothing in the world would have induced him to protest, to reveal that he was fast becoming a man utterly out of sympathy with his surroundings. Prudently, he kept quiet about that, as about everything else. When he had taken Charlotte Peloux to task for having disposed of several tons of sugar in rather a dubious fashion, had she not reminded him—and in no uncertain terms—of the time when he had shouted, without a trace of embarrassment, "Hand over five louis, Léa, so that I can go and buy some cigarettes"?

'Ah!' he sighed, 'they'll never understand anything, these women. It wasn't at all the same thing.'

Thus he let his thoughts run on, as he stood, bareheaded, his hair glistening, barely distinguishable in the mist. The shadowy form of a female passed close beside him, running. The rhythm of her steps and the crunch as each foot bit into the gravel betrayed anxiety and haste. Then the shadowy woman fell into the arms of a shadowy man who came to meet her, and down they fell together, breast to breast, as though struck by the same bullet.

'Those two are trying to hide,' Chéri thought. 'They're deceiving someone somewhere. The whole world's busy deceiving and

being deceived. But I . . .’ He did not finish the sentence, but a repugnance made him jump to his feet, an action that meant, ‘But I am chaste.’ A faint ray of light, flickering uncertainly over stagnant, hitherto unfeeling regions of his inmost being, was enough to suggest that chastity and loneliness are one and the same misfortune.

As night advanced, he began to feel the cold. From his prolonged, aimless vigils, he had learned that, at night, tastes, smells, and temperatures vary according to the hour, and that midnight is warm in comparison with the hour which immediately precedes the dawn.

‘The winter will soon be on us,’ he thought, as he lengthened his stride, ‘and none too soon, putting an end to this interminable summer. Next winter, I should like . . . let me see . . . next winter . . .’ His attempts at anticipation collapsed almost at once; and he came to a halt, head lowered, like a horse at the prospect of a long steep climb ahead.

‘Next winter, there’ll still be my wife, my mother, old gammer La Berche, Thingummy, What’s-his-name, and the rest of them. There’ll be the same old gang. . . . And for me there’ll never again be . . .’

He paused once more, to watch a procession of low clouds advancing over the Bois, clouds of an indescribable pink, set upon by a gusty wind which buried its fingers in their misty tresses, twisting and dragging them across the lawns of heaven, to carry them off to the moon. Chéri gazed with eyes well used to the translucent magic of the night, which those who sleep regard as pitch-dark.

The apparition of the large, flat, half-veiled moon among the scurrying vaporous clouds, which she seemed to be pursuing and tearing asunder, did not divert him from working out an arithmetical fantasy: he was computing—in years, months, hours and days—the amount of precious time that had been lost to him for ever.

‘Had I never let her go when I went to see her again that day before the war—then it would have meant three or four years to the good; hundreds and hundreds of days and nights

gained and garnered for love.' He did not fight shy of so big a word.

'Hundreds of days—a lifetime—life itself. Life as it was in the old days, life with my "worst enemy", as she used to call herself. My worst enemy! who forgave me all, and never let me off a single thing.' He seized hold of his past, to squeeze out every remaining drop upon his empty, arid present; bringing back to life, and inventing where necessary, the princely days of his youth, his adolescence shaped and guided by a woman's strong capable hands—loving hands, ever ready to chastise. A prolonged, sheltered, oriental adolescence, in which the pleasures of the flesh had their passing place, like silent pauses in a song. A life of luxury, passing whims, childish cruelty, with fidelity a yet unspoken word.

He threw back his head to look up at the nacreous halo which irradiated the whole sky, and he gave a low cry, 'It's all gone to hell! I'm thirty years old!'

He hurried on his way back home, heaping curses on himself to the rhythm of his quickened steps. 'Fool! The tragedy is not her age, but mine. Everything may be over for her, but, for me . . .'

He let himself in without making a sound, to find the house in silence at last; to be nauseated by the lingering stale smell of those who had dined, wined, and danced there. In the looking-glass fitted to the door in the hall he met face to face the young man who had grown so thin, whose cheeks had hardened, whose sad beautifully moulded upper lip was unshaven and blue, whose large eyes were reticent and tragic. The young man, in effect, who had ceased, inexplicably, to be twenty-four years old.

"For me," Chéri completed his thought, 'I really do believe that the last word has been said.'

"What I need is somewhere quiet, you understand. . . . Any little place would do. . . . A bachelor flat, a room, a corner. . . ."

"I wasn't born yesterday," said the Pal, reproachfully.

She raised disconsolate eyes towards the festoons on the ceiling: "A little love, of course, of course, a little kiss—some-

thing to warm a poor lonely heart. . . . You bet I understand! Any special fancy?"

Chéri frowned. "Fancy? For whom?"

"You don't understand, my pretty. . . . Fancy for any particular district?"

"Ah! . . . No, nothing special. Just a quiet corner."

The Pal nodded her large head in collusion. "I see, I see. Something after my style—like my flat. You know where I rest my bones?"

"Yes."

"No, you don't know at all. I was certain you wouldn't write it down. Two hundred and fourteen Rue de Villiers. It's not big, and it's not beautiful. But you don't want the sort of place where the whole street knows your business."

"No."

"I got mine, of course, through a little deal with my landlady. A jewel of a woman, by the way, married, or as good as. Periwinkle blue eyes, and a head like a bird; but she bears the mark of Fate on her forehead, and I already know from her cards that she can't say no to anything, and that——"

"Yes, yes. You were saying just now that you knew of a flat. . . ."

"Yes, but not good enough for you."

"You don't think so?"

"Not for you . . . not for the two of you!"

The Pal hid a suggestive smile in her whisky, and Chéri turned from its smell—like wet harness. He put up with her quips about his imaginary conquests, for he saw, round her scraggy neck, a string of large faked pearls which he thought he recognised. Every visual reminder of his past halted him on his downward path, and, during such respites, he felt at peace.

"Ah!" sighed the Pal, "How I'd love to catch a glimpse of her! What a pair! . . . I don't know her, of course, but I can just see you two together! . . . Of course you'll provide everything yourself?"

"For whom?"

"Why, the furniture in your love-nest, of course!"

He looked at the Pal in bewilderment. Furniture . . . What

furniture? He had been thinking only of one thing: a refuge of his own, with a door that opened and closed for him and no one else, safe from Edmée, Charlotte, all of them. . . .

"Will you furnish it in period or in modern style? La belle Serrano arranged her entire ground floor with nothing but Spanish shawls, but that was a bit eccentric. You're old enough, of course, to know your own mind. . . ."

He hardly heard her, far away in his dreams of a future home that would be secret, small, warm and dark. At the same time, he was drinking red currant syrup, like any young "miss", in the red-and-gold, out-of-date, unchanging bar, just as it used to be when, a small boy, Chéri had come there to sip his first fizzy drink through a straw. . . . Even the barman himself had not changed, and if the woman sitting opposite Chéri was now a withered specimen, at least he had never known her beautiful, or young.

"They all change, the whole of that set—my mother, my wife, all the people they see—and they live for change. My mother may change into a banker, Edmée into a town councillor. But I . . ."

In imagination, he quickly returned to that refuge, existing at some unknown point in space, but secret, small, warm, and . . .

"Mine's done up in Algerian style," the Pal persisted. "It's no longer in the fashion, but I don't mind—especially as the furniture is hired. You'll be sure to recognise many of the photos I've put up: and then there's the portrait of La Loupiote. . . . Come and have a look at it. Please do."

"I'd like to. Let's go!"

On the threshold he hailed a taxi.

"But d'you never have your motor? Why haven't you got your motor? It's really quite extraordinary how people with motors never have their motor!"

She gathered up her faded black skirts, caught the string of her lorgnette in the clasp of her bag, dropped a glove, and submitted to the stares of the passers-by with the lack of embarrassment of a Negro. Chéri, standing at her side, received several insulting smiles and the admiring condolences of a young

woman, who called out: "Lord, what a waste of good material!"

In the taxi, patiently and half asleep, he endured the old thing's tattle. And then some of her stories were soothing: the one about the ridiculous little dog which had held up the return from the races in 1897, and then Mère La Berche eloping with a young bride on the day of her wedding in 1893.

"That's it over there. This door's stuck, Chéri, I can't get out. I warn you, there's not much light in the passage, nor, for that matter, is there much out here. . . . It's only a ground-floor flat, when all's said and done! . . . Wait where you are a second."

He waited, standing in the semi-darkness. He heard the jingle of keys, the wheezy old creature's gasps for breath and then her fussy servant's voice, "I'm lighting up. . . . Then you'll find yourself in a familiar landscape. I've got electricity, of course. . . . There, let me introduce you to my little morning-room, which is also my large drawing-room!"

He went in, and, from kindness—hardly bothering to glance at it—praised the room; it had a low ceiling and reddish walls, kippered by the smoke of innumerable cigars and cigarettes. Instinctively, he looked all round for the window, barricaded by shutters and curtains.

"You can't see in here? You're not an old night-bird like your Pal. Wait, I'll switch on the top light."

"Don't bother. . . . I'll just come in and——" He broke off, staring at the most brightly lit wall, covered with small frames and photographs pinned through the four corners. The Pal began to laugh.

"What did I say about a familiar landscape! I was quite sure you'd enjoy looking at them. You haven't got that one, have you?"

'That one' was a very large photographic portrait-study, touched up with water colours now quite faded. Blue eyes, a laughing mouth, a chignon of fair hair, and a look of calm yet exultant triumph. . . . High-breasted—in a First Empire corselet, legs showing through gauze skirts, legs that never finished, rounded out at the thigh, slender at the knee, legs that. . . .

And a fetching hat, a hat that turned up on one side only, trimmed like a single sail to the wind.

"She never gave you that one, not that one, I bet! It makes her a goddess, a fairy walking on clouds! And yet it's absolutely her, of course. This big photo is the loveliest, to my way of thinking, but I'm still every bit as fond of the others. Here, for instance, look at this little one here—much more recent, of course—isn't it a sight for sore eyes?"

A snapshot, clinging to the wall with the help of a rusty pin, showed a woman standing in the shade against a sunlit garden.

'It's the navy-blue dress and the hat with the seagulls,' Chéri said to himself.

"I'm all for flattering portraits, myself," the Pal went on. "A portrait like this one. Come now—you must confess—isn't it enough to make you join your hands and believe in God?"

A degraded and smarmy art, to lend glamour to the "portrait photograph," had lengthened the neck line and modified those around the sitter's mouth. But the nose, just sufficiently aquiline, the delicious nose with its ravishing nostrils, and the chaste little dimple, the velvety cleft that indented the upper lip under the nose—these were untouched, authentic, respected by even the photographer.

"Would you believe it? She wanted to burn the lot, pretending that nobody to-day is the least interested in what she used to be like. My blood boiled, I shrieked like a soul in torment, and she gave me the whole collection the very same day that she made me a present of the bag with her monogram. . . ."

"Who's this fellow with her . . . here . . . in this one underneath?"

"What were you saying? What's that? Wait till I take off my hat."

"I'm asking you who this is—this fellow—here. Get a move on, can't you?"

"Heavens, don't bustle me about so. . . . That? It's Bacciocchi, come! Naturally, you can hardly be expected to recognise him, he dates from two turns before you."

"Two what?"

"After Bacciocchi, she had Septfons—and yet no—wait . . . Septfons was earlier than that. . . . Septfons, Bacciocchi, Spéleïeff, and you. Oh! do look at those check trousers! . . . How ridiculous men's fashions used to be!"

"And that photo over there; when was that taken?"

He drew back a step, for at his elbow the Pal's head was craning forward, and its magpie's nest of felted hair smelt like a wig.

"That? That's her costume for Auteuil in . . . in 1888, or '89. Yes, the year of the Exhibition. In front of that one, dear boy, you should raise your hat. They don't turn out beauties like that any more."

"Pooh! . . . I don't think it so stunning."

The Pal folded her hands. Hatless, she looked older, and her high forehead was a buttery yellow under hair dyed greenish black.

"Not so stunning! That waist you could encircle with your ten fingers! That lily neck! And be good enough to let your eyes rest on that dress! All in frilled sky-blue chiffon, dear boy, and looped up with little pink moss-roses sewn on to the frills, and the hat to match! And the little bag to match as well—we called them alms-bags at that time. Oh! the beauty she was then! There's been nothing since to compare with her first appearances: she was the dawn, the very sun of love."

"First appearances where?"

She gave Chéri a gentle dig in the ribs. "Get along with you. . . . How you make me laugh! Ah! the trials of life must melt into thin air when you're about the house!"

His rigid features passed unobserved. He was still facing the wall, seemingly riveted by several Léas—one smelling an artificial rose, another bending over a book with medieval hasps, her swan neck rising from a pleatless collar, a white and rounded neck like the bole of a birch-tree.

"Well, I must be going," he said, like Valérie Chéniaquine.

"What d'you mean—you must be going? What about my dining-room? And my bedroom? just glance at them, my pretty! Take a note of them for your little love-nest."

"Ah! yes. . . . Listen; not to-day, because . . ." He glanced

distrustfully towards the rampart of portraits, and lowered his voice. "I've an appointment. But I'll come back . . . to-morrow. Probably to-morrow, before dinner."

"Good. Then I can go ahead?"

"Go ahead?"

"With the flat."

"Yes, that's right. See about it. And thanks."

'I really begin to wonder what the world's coming to. . . . Young or old—it's hard to tell which are the most disgusting. . . . Two "turns" before me! . . . and "the first appearances", said the old spider, "the dazzling first appearances". . . . And all quite openly. No, really, what a world!'

He found that he had been keeping up the pace of a professional walker in training, and that he was out of breath. And all the more because the distant storm—which would not burst over Paris—had walled off what breeze there was behind a violet bastion, now towering straight up against the sky. Alongside the fortifications of the Boulevard Berthier, under trees stripped bare by the summer drought, a sparse crowd of Parisians in rope-soled sandals and a few half-naked children in red jerseys seemed to be waiting for a tidal wave to come rolling up from Levallois-Perret. Chéri sat down on a bench, forgetting that his strength was apt to play him tricks. He was unaware that his strength was being sapped in some mysterious manner ever since he had started to fritter it away on night vigils, and had neglected to exercise or nourish his body.

' "Two turns!" Really! Two turns before me! And after me, how many? Add the whole lot together, myself included, and how many turns d'you get?'

Beside a blue-clad, seagull-hatted Léa, he could see a tall, broad Spéleïeff, smiling expansively. He remembered a sad Léa, red-eyed with weeping, stroking his head when he was a small boy and calling him a "horrid little man in the making".

"Léa's lover" . . . "Léa's new pet" . . . Traditional and meaningless words—as common on everyone's lips as talk about the weather, the latest odds at Auteuil, or the dishonesty of servants. "Are you coming, kid?" Spéleïeff would say to Chéri.

"We'll go out and have a porto at Armenonville, while we wait for Léa to join us. Nothing would drag her out of bed this morning."

"She's got a ravishing new little Bacciocchi," Madame Peloux had informed her son, aged fourteen or fifteen at the time.

But, a bundle of sophistication and innocence, brought up in the midst of love, yet blinded by its proximity, Chéri, at that tender age, had talked love, as children learn a language by ear, picking up words, pleasant or filthy, merely as sounds without meaning. No vivid or voluptuous vision arose behind the shadow of this huge Spéleïeff so recently risen from Léa's bed. And was there really very much difference between this "ravishing little Bacciocchi" and a "prize Pekingese"?

No photograph or letter, no story from the only lips that might have told him the truth, had blighted the enclosed Paradise in which Léa and Chéri had dwelt for so many years. Next to nothing in Chéri existed which dated back beyond Léa: why, then, should he bother about a man who, before his day, had brought warmth or sadness or riches to his mistress?

A fair-haired little boy with fat knees came and planted his crossed arms on the bench beside Chéri. They glared at each other with identical expressions of offended reserve, for Chéri treated all children as strangers. For some time this boy let his pale blue eyes rest on Chéri, who watched some sort of indescribable smile, full of scorn, mount up from the small anæmic mouth to the flax-blue pupils of the eyes. Then the child turned away, and, picking up his dirty toys from the dust, began to play at the foot of the bench, blotting Chéri out of existence. Then Chéri got up and walked away.

Half an hour later, he was lying in a warm, scented bath, clouded by some milky bath essence. He lay revelling in its luxury and comfort, in the soft lather of the soap, and in the remote faint sounds about the house, as though they were the rewards of an act of great courage, or else blessings he was tasting for the last time.

His wife came into the room humming, broke off at the sight of him, and narrowly failed to disguise her speechless astonishment at finding Chéri at home and in his bath.

"Am I in your way?" he asked, with no irony.

"Not in the least, Fred."

She began to take off her day clothes with youthful abandon, with total disregard for modesty or immodesty, and Chéri was amused by her haste to be undressed and in a bath.

'How completely I'd forgotten her,' he thought, as he looked at the odalisque back, supple but well-covered, of the woman bending down to untie her shoelaces.

She did not speak to him, but went about her business like a woman who believes she is safely by herself, and in front of his eyes rose the figure of the child who, not long since, had been playing in the dust at his feet, resolutely ignoring his presence.

"Tell me . . ."

Edmée raised a surprised forehead, a soft half-naked body.

"What would you say to our having a child?"

"Fred! . . . What are you thinking of?"

It was almost a cry of terror, and already Edmée was clutching a wisp of lawn close to her bosom with one hand, while with the other she groped, fumbling, for the first kimono within reach. Chéri could not hold back his laughter.

"Would you like my revolver? I'm not going to assault you."

"Why are you laughing?" she asked, almost in a whisper. "You should never laugh."

"I seldom laugh. But do tell me . . . now that all is quiet and peaceful between us . . . do tell me why. Are you really so terrified at the thought that we could have had, could still have, a child?"

"Yes," she said cruelly, and her unexpected frankness shocked even herself.

She never took her eyes off her husband, lying full length in a low armchair, and she murmured distinctly enough for him to hear, "A child . . . who'd be sure to take after you. You twice over, you twice over in the single lifetime of one woman? No. . . . Oh, no."

He began a gesture which she misinterpreted.

"No, I beg of you. . . . There's nothing more to be said. I won't even discuss it. Let's leave things as they are. We've only

to be a little cautious, and go on . . . I ask nothing of you . . .”

“That suits you?”

Her only answer was to put on a look, insulting in its misery and plaintive helplessness, a seraglio look that well suited her nakedness. Her freshly powdered cheeks, the touch of colour on her youthful lips, the light brown halo round her hazel eyes, the care bestowed on every feature of her face, were in striking contrast to the confusion of her body, bare except for the crumpled silk shift she was clasping to her breasts.

‘I can no longer make her happy,’ thought Chéri, ‘but I can still make her suffer. She is not altogether unfaithful to me. Whereas I am not untrue to her . . . I have deserted her.’

Turning away from him, she began to dress. She had regained her freedom of movement and her disingenuous tolerance. The palest of pink frocks now hid from view the woman who, a moment since, had pressed her last stitch of clothing to her bosom, as though to a wound.

She had recovered, too, her buoyant determination, her desire to live and hold sway, her prodigious and feminine aptitude for happiness. Chéri despised her afresh; but a moment came when the rays of the evening sun, shining through her transparent pink dress, outlined the shape of a young woman who no longer bore any semblance to the wounded Circassian: a heaven-aspiring form, as supple and vigorous as a serpent about to strike.

‘I can still hurt her, but how quickly she recovers! In this house, too, I am no longer needed, no longer expected. She has gone far beyond me, and is going further: I am, the old creature would say, her “first turn”. It’s now for me to follow her example, if only I could. But I can’t. And then would I, if I could? Unlike some of us, Edmée has never come up against what one meets only once in a lifetime and is floored by completely. Spéleïeff was fond of saying that, after a really bad crash—which, however, involved no broken bones—some horses would let themselves be killed rather than take the fence again. I am just the same.’

He cast about for further sporting, and rather brutal, metaphors that would make his own fall and misfortunes seem an accident. But he had started his night too early, and, dog-tired, his dreams were haunted by sweet ghosts in sky-blue flounces, and half-remembered figures from the pages of the imperishable literature which finds its way into tawdry love-nests, from tales and poems dedicated to constancy and to lovers undivided in death: writings irresistible to adolescents and time-worn courtesans, who are akin in their credulity and passion for romance.

"Then she said to me: 'I know who's at the back of all this: it's Charlotte again, making mischief about me. . . .' 'It's no more than you deserve,' I told her, 'you've only to stop going to see Charlotte as much as you do, and trusting her with all your secrets.' She retorted: 'I'm a much closer friend of Charlotte's than of Spéleïeff's and I've known her far longer. I assure you Charlotte, Neuilly, bezique and the child would be a far greater loss to me than Spéleïeff—you can't change the habits of a lifetime.' 'That doesn't prevent your faith in Charlotte costing you a pretty penny,' I said. 'Oh! well,' was her answer, 'what's good is worth paying for.' That's her all over, you'll agree: big-hearted and generous but no fool. And with that she went off to dress for the Races—she told me she was going to the Races with a gigolo. . . ."

"With me!" Chéri exclaimed bitterly. "Am I right? It was me?"

"I don't deny it. I simply tell you things as they took place. A white dress—of white crêpe-de-chine—Oriental-looking, edged with blue Chinese embroidery, the very dress you see her in here, in this snapshot, taken at the Races. And nothing will get it out of my head that this man's shoulder you can see behind her is you."

"Fetch it me!" Chéri ordered.

The old woman got up, pulled out the rusty drawing-pins tacking the photograph to the wall, and brought it back to Chéri. Lolling on the Algerian divan, he raised a tousled head, and, barely running his eyes over it, flung the snapshot across the room.

"When have you seen me wearing a collar that gapes at the back, and a short coat to go to the Races? Come, think again! I don't find that sort of thing at all funny."

She ventured a tut-tut of timid censure, bent her stiff knees to pick up the photograph, and went on to open the door into the passage.

"Where are you going?"

"I can hear the water for my coffee boiling. I'm going to pour it out."

"Good. But come back here again."

She disappeared in a shuffle of rustling taffeta and heelless slippers. Left to himself, Chéri settled his neck against the moquette cushion stamped with Tunisian designs. A new and startlingly bright Japanese kimono, embellished with pink wistaria on a ground of amethyst, had replaced his coat and waistcoat. The fag-end of a too-far-smoked cigarette was almost burning his lips, and his hair, falling fanwise down to the level of his eyebrows, half covered his forehead.

Wearing so feminine and flowered a garment did not make his appearance in any way ambiguous: he merely acquired an ignominious majesty that stamped every feature with its proper value. He seemed bent on death and destruction, and the photograph had flashed like a blade from his hand as he hurled it from him. Hard, delicate bones in his cheeks moved to the rhythm of his working jaws. The whites of his eyes flickered in the darkness round him like the crest of a wave, with the moonbeams interruptedly following its course.

Left alone, however, he let his head sink back against the cushion, and closed his eyes.

"Lord!" exclaimed the Pal coming back into the room, "you'll not look more handsome when laid out on your deathbed! I've brought in the coffee. Would you care for some? Such an aroma! It will waft you to the Isles of the Blest."

"Yes. Two lumps."

His words were curt, and she obeyed with a humility that suggested, perhaps, a deep subservient pleasure.

"You didn't eat anything for dinner?"

"I had enough."

He drank his coffee, without moving, supporting himself on one elbow. An Oriental curtain, draped like a canopy, hung from the ceiling directly above the divan, and in its shade lay an ivory and enamel Chéri, robed in exquisite silks, reclining upon an old worn dust-bedraggled rug.

The Pal set out, piece by piece upon a brass-topped table, the coffee-set, an opium lamp capped with a glass cowl, two pipes, the pot of paste, the silver snuff-box used for cocaine, and a flask, which, tight-stoppered as it was, failed to control the cold and treacherously volatile expansion of the ether. To these she added a pack of tarot cards, a case of poker chips, and a pair of spectacles, before settling herself down with the apologetic air of a trained hospital nurse.

"I've already told you," grunted Chéri, "all that paraphernalia means nothing to me."

Once again she stretched out her sickly white hands in protestation. In her own home she adopted what she called her "Charlotte Corday style": hair flowing loose, and wide white linen fichus crossed over her dusty mourning, looking a mixture of decorum and fallen virtue—like a heroine of the Salpêtrière Prison.

"No matter, Chéri. They're just in case. And it does make me so happy to see the whole of my little armoury set out in its proper order under my eyes. The arsenal of dreams! the munitions of ecstasy! the gateway to illusion!"

She nodded her long head and looked up to the ceiling, with the compassionate eyes of a grandmother who ruins herself on toys. Her guest partook of none of her potions. Some sort of physical sense of honour still survived in him, and his disdain for drugs was akin to his distaste for brothels.

For a number of days—he had kept no count of them—he had found his way to this black hole, presided over by an attendant Norn. Ungraciously, and in terms that brooked no argument, he had paid her for food, coffee and her own liqueurs, and for his personal requirements in the way of cigarettes, fruit, ice and soft drinks. He had commanded his slave to buy the sumptuous Japanese robe, scents and expensive soaps. She was moved less by desire for money than by the pleasure of acting as

an accomplice. She devoted herself to Chéri with enthusiasm, a revival of her old zeal as a missionary of vice who, with garrulous and culpable alacrity, would divest and bathe a virgin, cook an opium pellet, and pour out intoxicating spirits or ether. This apostolate was fruitless, for her singular guest brought back no paramour, drank soft drinks only, stretched himself on the dusty divan and delivered only one word of command: "Talk."

She did talk, following, she believed, her own fancies; but, now brutally, now subtly, he would direct the muddled meanderings of her reminiscences. She talked like a sewing-woman who comes in by the day, with the continuous, stupefying monotony of creatures whose days are given over to long and sedentary tasks. But she never did any sewing, for she had the aristocratic unpracticalness of a former prostitute. While talking, she would pin a pleat over a hole or stain, and take up again the business of tarot cards and patience. She would put on gloves to grind coffee bought by the charwoman, and then handle greasy cards without turning a hair.

She talked, and Chéri listened to her soporific voice and the shuffle of her felted slippers. He reclined at ease, magnificently robed, in the ill-kempt lodging. His guardian dared ask no questions. She knew enough: he was a monomaniac, as his abstemiousness proved. The illness for which she was ministering was mysterious; but it was an illness. She took the risk of inviting, as from a sense of duty, a very pretty young woman, childish and professionally gay. Chéri paid her neither more nor less attention than he would a puppy, and said to the Pal, "Are we going to have any more of your fashionable parties?"

She did not require snubbing a second time, and he never had cause to bind her to secrecy. One day she almost hit upon the simple truth, when she proposed asking in two or three of her friends of the good old days; Léa, for instance. He never batted an eyelid.

"Not a soul. Or I'll have to hunt out some better hole."

A fortnight went by, as funereal in its routine as life in a monastery; but it did not pall on either recluse. During the daytime, the Pal set forth on her old woman's junketings; poker parties, nips of whisky, and poisonous gossip, hole-and-corner

gambling-dens, lunches of "regional dishes" in the stuffy darkness of a Norman or Limousin restaurant. Chéri would arrive with the first shadow of evening, sometimes drenched to the skin. She would recognise the slam of his taxi-door and no longer asked: "But why do you never come in your motor?"

He would leave after midnight, and usually before daybreak. During his prolonged sessions on the Algerian divan, the Pal sometimes saw him drop off to sleep and remain for an instant or two with his neck twisted against his shoulder, as though caught in a snare. She never slept herself till after his departure, having forgotten the need for repose. Only once, in the small hours of the morning, while he was putting back, meticulously and one by one, the contents of his pockets—key on its chain, note-case, little flat revolver, handkerchief, cigarette-case of green gold—did she dare to ask: "Doesn't your wife begin to wonder, when you come in so late?"

Chéri raised long eyebrows above eyes grown larger from lack of sleep: "No. Why? She knows perfectly well I've been up to no harm."

"No child, of course, is easier to manage than you are. . . . Shall you be coming again this evening?"

"I don't know. I'll see. Carry on as if I were coming for certain."

Once more he gazed long at all the lily necks, all the blue eyes, that flowered on one wall of his sanctuary, before he went his way, only to return again, faithfully, some twelve hours later.

By roundabout ways he considered cunning, he would lead the Pal to talk of Léa, then he would clear the narrative of all bawdy asides that might retard it. "Skip it. Skip it!" Barely bothering to enunciate the words, he relied on the initial sibilants to speed up or curtail the monologue. He would listen only to stories without malice in them, and glorifications of a purely descriptive nature. He insisted upon strict respect for documentary truth and checked his chronicler peevishly. He stocked his mind with dates, colours, materials, and places, and the names of dress-makers.

"What's poplin?" he fired at her pointblank.

"Poplin's a mixture of silk and wool, a dry material . . . if you know what I mean; one that doesn't stick to the skin."

"Yes. And mohair? You said 'of white mohair.'"

"Mohair is a kind of alpaca, but it hangs better, of course. Léa was afraid to wear lawn in the summer: she maintained that it was best for underwear and handkerchiefs. Her own lingerie was fit for a queen, you'll remember, and in the days when that photograph was taken—yes, that beauty over there with the long legs—they didn't wear the plain underclothes of to-day. It was frill upon frill, a foam, a flurry of snow; and the drawers, dear boy! they'd have sent your head whirling . . . White Chantilly lace at the sides and black Chantilly in between. Can't you just see the effect? But *can* you imagine it?"

'Revolting,' thought Chéri, 'revolting. Black Chantilly in between. A woman doesn't wear black Chantilly in between simply to please herself. In front of whose eyes did she wear them? For whom?'

He could see Léa's gesture as he entered her bathroom or boudoir—the furtive gesture as she drew her wrap across her body. He could see the chaste self-confidence of her rosy body as she lay naked in the bath, with the water turned to milk by some essence or other. . . . 'But, for others, she wore drawers of Chantilly lace. . . .'

He kicked one of the hay-stuffed moquette cushions to the floor.

"Are you too warm, Chéri?"

"No. Let me have another look at that photo . . . the large framed one. Tilt the what's-its-name of your lamp up a bit . . . a bit more . . . that's it!"

Abandoning his usual circumspection, he applied a searching eye to the study of every detail that was new to him, and almost refreshing. 'A high-waisted belt with cameos! . . . Never saw that about the place. And boots like buskins! Was she wearing tights? No, of course not, her toes are bare. Revolting. . . .'

"At whose house did she wear that costume?"

"I don't rightly remember. . . . A reception at the club, I believe . . . or at Molier's."

He handed back the frame at arm's length, to all appearances

disdainful and bored. He left shortly afterwards, under an overcast sky, towards the close of a night that smelt of wood smoke and dankness.

He was deteriorating physically and took no account of it. He was losing weight through eating and sleeping too little, walking and smoking too much, thus bartering his obvious vigour for a lightness, an apparent return to youth, which the light of day repudiated. At home, he lived as he pleased, welcoming or running away from guests and callers. All that they knew of him was his name, his almost petrified good looks fined down little by little under an accusing chisel, and the inconceivable ease with which he would ignore them.

So he eked out his peaceful and carefully regimented despair until the last days of October. Then, one afternoon, he was seized by a fit of hilarity, because he caught a glimpse of his wife's unsuspected terror. His whole face lit up with the merriment of a man impervious to all feeling. 'She thinks I'm mad. What luck!'

His merriment was short-lived: for, on thinking it over, he came to the conclusion that, where the brute and the madman are concerned, the brute wins every time. She was frightened of the madman; otherwise would she not have stood her ground, biting her lips and forcing back her tears, in order to worst the brute?

'I am no longer even considered wicked,' he thought bitterly. 'And that's because I am no longer wicked. Oh! the harm the woman I left has done to me! Yet others left her, and she left others. . . . How, I wonder, does Bacciocchi exist at the present time? or Septfons, Spéleïeff, and all the rest of them? But what have we got in common, I and the rest of them? She called me "little bourgeois" because I counted the bottles in the cellar. "Little bourgeois", "faithful heart", "great lover"—those were her names for me—those were my real names: and, though she watched my departure with tears glistening in her eyes, she is still herself, Léa, who prefers old age to me, who sits in the corner by the fire counting over on her fingers: "I've had What's-his-name, and Thingummy-bob, and Chéri, and So-and-so" I thought she belonged to me alone, and never perceived that I

was only one among her lovers. Is there anyone left, now, that I am not ashamed of?"

Hardened by now to the exercise of impassivity, he sought to endure the capricious hauntings of such thoughts with resignation, and to be worthy of the devil by which he was possessed. Proud and dry-eyed, with a lighted match held between steady fingers, he looked sideways at his mother, well aware of her watchful eye. Once his cigarette was alight, with a little encouragement he would have strutted like a peacock in front of an invisible public, and taunted his tormentors with a "Good, isn't it?" In a confused way, the strength born of his dissimulation and resistance was gathering in his inmost self. He was beginning now to enjoy his extreme state of detachment, and dimly perceived that an emotional storm could be just as valuable and refreshing as a lull, and that in it he might discover the wisdom which never came to him in calmer moods. As a child, Chéri frequently had taken advantage of a genuine fit of temper, by changing it into a peevishness that would bring him what he wanted. To-day he was fast approaching the point at which, having attained to a definite state of unhappiness, he could rely on it to settle everything.

One gusty, wind-swept, September afternoon, with leaves sailing straight across the sky—an afternoon of blue rifts in the clouds and scattered raindrops—Chéri felt an urge to visit his dark retreat and its attendant, garbed in black, with a touch of white on the chest like a scavenging cat. He was feeling buoyant, and avid for confidences, though these would be sickly, like the fruit of the arbutus and as prickly leaved. Words and phrases of special though ill-defined significance kept running in his head: "Her monogram embroidered in hair on all her lingerie, dear boy, in golden hairs from her own head . . . faery handicraft! And, did I tell you, her masseuse used to pluck the hairs from the calves of her leg, one by one. . . ."

He turned round and left the window. He found Charlotte on a chair looking thoughtfully up at him; and in the restless waters of her great eyes he saw the formation of a prodigious, rounded, crystalline, glistening sphere which detached itself from the

bronzed pupil, and then vanished, evaporating in the heat of her flushed cheek. Chéri felt flattered and cheered. 'How kind of her! She's weeping for me.'

An hour later, he found his ancient accomplice at her post. But she was wearing some sort of parson's hat, bunched up with shiny black ribbon, and she held out to him a sheet of blue paper, which he waved aside.

"What's that? . . . I haven't the time. Tell me what's written on it."

The Pal lifted puzzled eyes to his: "It's my mother."

"Your mother? You're joking."

She did her best to appear offended. "I'm not joking at all. Please respect the departed! She is dead." And she added, by way of an excuse, "She was eighty-three!"

"Congratulations. Are you going out?"

"No; I'm going away."

"Where to?"

"To Tarascon, and from there I take a little branch line train that puts me down at . . ."

"For how long?"

"Four or five days . . . at least. There's the solicitor to be seen about the will, because my younger sister . . ."

He burst out, hands to heaven: "A sister now! Why not four children into the bargain?" He was conscious of the unexpectedly high-pitched tone of his voice and controlled it. "Good, very well. What d'you expect me to do about it? Be off, be off. . . ."

"I was going to leave word for you. I'm catching the 7:30."

"Catch the 7:30."

"The time of the funeral service is not mentioned in the telegram: my sister speaks only of the laying out, the climate down there is very hot, they'll have to get through it very quickly, only the business side can keep me there, and over that one has no control."

"Of course, of course."

He was walking to and fro, from the door to the wall with the photographs and back to the door again, and in doing so he knocked against a squashed old travelling-bag. The coffee-pot and cups were steaming on the table.

"I made you your coffee, come what might. . . ."

"Thanks."

They drank standing up, as at a station, and the chill of departure gripped Chéri by the throat and made his teeth chatter secretly.

"Goodbye, then, dear boy," said the Pal. "You may be sure that I'll hurry things as much as I can."

"Goodbye—pleasant journey."

They shook hands, and she did not dare to kiss him. "Won't you stay here for a little while?"

He looked all round in great agitation. "No. No."

"Take the key, then?"

"Why should I?"

"You're at home here. You've fallen into the habit of it. I've told Maria to come every day at five and light a good fire and get the coffee ready. . . . So take my key, won't you? . . ."

With a limp hand he took the key, and it struck him as enormous. Once outside, he longed to throw it away or take it back to the concierge.

The old woman took courage on her way between her own door and the street, loading him with instructions as she might a child of twelve.

"The electric-light switch is on your left as you go in. The kettle is always on the gas-stove in the kitchen, and all you have to do is to put a match to it. And your Japanese robe—Maria has her instructions to leave it folded at the head of the divan and the cigarettes in their usual place."

Chéri nodded affirmation once or twice, with the look of courageous unconcern of a schoolboy on the last morning of the holidays. And, when he was alone, it did not occur to him to make fun of his old retainer with the dyed hair, who had placed the proper value both on the last prerogatives of the dead and on the little pleasures of one whom all had now deserted.

The following morning, he awoke from an indecipherable dream, in which a crush of people were all running in the same direction. Though he saw only their backs, each was known to him. As they hurried by, he identified his mother, Léa—unac-

countably naked, and out of breath—Desmond, the Pal, and young Mandru . . . Edmée was the only one to turn and smile at him, with the grating little smile of a marten. “But it’s the marten Ragut caught in the Vosges!” Chéri cried out in his dream, and this discovery pleased him immeasurably. Then he checked and recounted all the one-way runners, saying over to himself: ‘There’s one missing. . . . There’s one missing. . . .’ Once out of his dream, on this side of awakening, it came to him that the one missing was none other than himself: ‘I must get back into it. . . .’ But the efforts of exerting every limb, like an insect caught on flypaper, served only to widen the bar of blue between his eyelids, and he emerged into that real world in which he was frittering away his time and his strength. He stretched out his legs, and bathed them in a fresh, cool part of the sheets. ‘Edmée must have got up some time ago.’

He was surprised to see beneath the window a new garden of marguerites and heliotrope, for in his memory there was only a summer garden of blue and pink. He rang, and the sound of the bell brought to life a maid whose face was unfamiliar.

“Where is Henriette?”

“I’ve taken her place, sir.”

“Since when?”

“Why—for the last month, sir.”

He ejaculated an “Ah!”, as much as to say, “That explains everything.”

“Where’s your mistress?”

“Madame is just coming, sir. Madame is ready to go out.”

Edmée, indeed, did appear, as large as life, but stopped just inside the door in so marked a manner that Chéri was secretly amused. He allowed himself the pleasure of upsetting his wife a little by exclaiming, “But it’s Ragut’s marten!” and watching her pretty eyes waver under his gaze.

“Fred, I . . .”

“Yes, you’re going out. I never heard you get up.”

She coloured slightly. “There’s nothing extraordinary in that. I’ve been sleeping so badly these last few nights, that I’ve had a bed made up on the divan in the boudoir. You’re not doing anything special to-day, are you?”

"But I am," he replied darkly.

"Is it important?"

"Very important." He took his time, and finished on a lighter note: "I'm going to have my hair cut."

"But will you be back for luncheon?"

"No; I'll have a cutlet in Paris. I've made an appointment at Gustave's for a quarter past two. The man who usually comes to cut my hair is ill."

He was childishly courteous, the lie flowering effortlessly on his lips. Because he was lying, his mouth took on its boyhood mould—poutingly provocative and rounded for a kiss. Edmée looked at him with an almost masculine satisfaction.

"You're looking well this morning, Fred. . . . I must fly."

"Are you catching the 7:30?"

She stared at him, struck dumb, and fled so precipitately that he was still laughing when the front door slammed behind her.

'Ah! that does me good,' he sighed. 'How easy it is to laugh when you no longer expect anything from anyone. . . .' Thus, while he was dressing, did he discover for himself the nature of asceticism, and the tuneless little song he hummed through pursed lips kept him company like a silly young nun.

He went down to a Paris he had forgotten. The crowd upset his dubious emotional balance, now so dependent on a crystalline vacuity and the daily routine of suffering.

In the Rue Royale he came face to face with his own full-length reflection at the moment when the brightness of noon broke through the rain-clouds. Chéri wasted no thoughts on this crude new self-portrait, which stood out sharply against a background of newsvendors and shopgirls, flanked by jade necklaces and silver fox furs. The fluid feeling in his stomach, which he compared to a speck of lead bobbing about inside a celluloid ball, must come, he thought, from lack of sustenance, and he took refuge in a restaurant.

With his back to a glass partition, screened from the light of day, he lunched off selected oysters, fish and fruit. Some young women sitting not far away had no eyes for him, and this gave him a pleasant feeling, like that of a chilly bunch of violets laid on closed eyelids. But the smell of his coffee suddenly brought

home the need to rise and keep the appointment of which this smell was an urgent reminder. Before obeying the summons, he went to his hairdresser's, held out his hands to be manicured, and slipped off into a few moments' inestimable repose, while expert fingers substituted their will for his.

The enormous key obstructed his pocket. 'I won't go, I won't go! . . .' To the cadence of some such insistent, meaningless refrain, he found his way without mishap to the Avenue de Villiers. His clumsy fumbling round the lock and the rasp of the key made his heart beat momentarily faster, but the cheerful warmth in the passage calmed his nerves.

He went forward cautiously, lord of this empire of a few square feet, which he now owned but did not know. The useless daily arrangement of the armoury had been laid out on the table by the well-trained charwoman, and an earthenware coffee-pot stood in the midst of charcoal embers already dying under the velvet of warm ashes. Methodically, Chéri emptied his pockets and set out one by one his cigarette case, the huge key, his own small key, the flat revolver, his note-case, handkerchief, and watch; but when he had put on his Japanese robe, he did not lie down on the divan. With the silent curiosity of a cat he opened doors and peered into cupboards. His peculiar prudishness shrank back before a primitive but distinctively feminine lavatory. The bedroom, all bed and little else, also was decorated in the mournful shade of red that seems to settle in on those of declining years; it smelt of old bachelors and eau-de-Cologne. Chéri returned to the drawing-room. He switched on the two wall lamps and the beribboned chandelier. He listened to faint far away sounds and, now that he was alone for the first time in this poor lodging, began trying out on himself the influence of its previous inmates—birds of passage or else dead. He thought he heard and recognised a familiar footstep, a slipshod, shambling old animal pad-pad, then shook his head: 'It can't be hers. She won't be back for a week, and when she does come back, what will there be left for me in this world? I'll have . . .'

Inwardly he listened to the Pal's voice, the worn-out voice of a tramp. "But wait till I finish the story of the famous slanging-match between Léa and old Mortier at the Races. Old Mortier

thought that with the aid of a little publicity in *Gil Blas* he would get all he wanted out of Léa. Oh! la la, my pretties, what a donkey he made of himself! She drove out to Longchamp—a dream of blue—as statuesque as a goddess, in her victoria drawn by a pair of piebalds. . . .”

He raised his hand towards the wall in front of him, where so many blue eyes were smiling, where so many swan-necks were preening themselves above imperturbable bosoms. ‘. . . I’ll have all this. All this, and nothing more. It’s true, perhaps, that this is a good deal. I’ve found her again, by a happy chance, found her here on this wall. But I’ve found her, only to lose her again for ever. I am still held up, like her, by these few rusty nails, by these pins stuck in slantwise. How much longer can this go on? Not very long. And then, knowing myself as I do, I’m afraid I shall demand more than this. I may suddenly cry out: “I want her! I must have her! Now! at this very moment!” Then what will become of me?’

He pushed the divan closer to the illustrated wall and there lay down. And as he lay there, all the Léas, with their downward gazing eyes, seemed to be showing concern for him: ‘But they only *seem* to be looking down at me, I know perfectly well. When you sent me away, my Nounoune, what did you think there was left for me after you? Your noble action cost you little—you knew the worth of a Chéri—your risk was negligible. But we’ve been well punished, you and I: you, because you were born so long before me, and I, because I loved you above all other women. You’re finished now, you have found your consolation—and what a disgrace that is!—whereas I . . . As long as people say, “There was the War,” I can say “There was Léa.” Léa, the War . . . I never imagined I’d dream of either of them again, yet the two together have driven me outside the times I live in. Henceforth, there is nowhere in the world where I can occupy more than half a place. . . .’

He pulled the table nearer to consult his watch. ‘Half-past five. The old creature won’t be back here for another week. And this is the first day. Supposing she were to die on the way?’

He fidgeted on his divan, smoked, poured himself out a cup of luke-warm coffee. ‘A week. All the same, I mustn’t ask too much

of myself. In a week's time . . . which story will she be telling me? I know them off by heart—the one about the Four-in-Hand Meet, the one about the slanging-match at Longchamp, the one about the final rupture—and when I've heard every one, every twist and turn of them, what will there be left? Nothing, absolutely nothing. In a week's time, this old woman—and I'm already so impatient for her, she might be going to give me an injection—this old woman will be here, and . . . and she'll bring me nothing at all.'

He lifted beseeching eyes to his favourite photograph. Already this speaking likeness filled him with less resentment, less ecstasy, less heartbreak. He turned from side to side on the hard mattress, unable to prevent his muscles from contracting, like a man who aches to jump from a height, but lacks the courage.

He worked himself up till he groaned aloud, repeating over and over again, "Nounoune", to make himself believe he was frantic. But he fell silent, ashamed, for he knew very well that he did not need to be frantic to pick up the little flat revolver from the table. Without rising, he experimented in finding a convenient position. Finally he lay down with his right arm doubled up under him. Holding the weapon in his right hand, he pressed his ear against the muzzle, which was buried in the cushions. At once his arm began to grow numb, and he realised that if he did not make haste his tingling fingers would refuse to obey him. So he made haste, whimpering muffled complaints as he completed his task, because his forearm was hurting, crushed under the weight of his body. He knew nothing more, beyond the pressure of his forefinger on a little lever of tempered steel.

GIGI

Translated by Roger Senhouse

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"Don't forget you are going to Aunt Alicia's. Do you hear me, Gilberte? Come here and let me do your curls. Gilberte, do you hear me?"

"Couldn't I go there without having my hair curled, Grandmamma?"

"I should think not," said Madame Alvarez, quietly. She took an old pair of curling-irons, with prongs ending in little round metal knobs, and put them to heat over the blue flame of a spirit-lamp while she prepared the tissue-papers.

"Grandmamma, couldn't you crimp my hair in waves down the side of my head for a change?"

"Out of the question. Ringlets at the very ends—that's as far as a girl of your age can possibly go. Now sit down on the footstool."

To do so, Gilberte folded up under her the heron-like legs of a girl of fifteen. Below her tartan skirt, she revealed ribbed cotton stockings to just above the knees, unconscious of the perfect oval shape of her knee-caps. Slender calf and high arched instep—Madame Alvarez never let her eyes run over these fine points without regretting that her granddaughter had not studied dancing professionally. At the moment, she was thinking only of the girl's hair. She had corkscrewed the ends and fixed them in tissue-paper, and was now compressing the ash-blond ringlets between the heated knobs. With patient soft-fingered skill, she gathered up the full magnificent weight of finely kept hair into sleek ripples which fell to just below Gilberte's shoulders. The girl sat quite still. The smell of the heated tongs, and the whiff of vanilla in the curling-papers, made her feel drowsy. Besides, Gilberte knew

that resistance would be useless. She hardly ever tried to elude the authority exercised by her family.

"Is Mamma singing Frasquita today?"

"Yes. And this evening in *Si j'étais Roi*. I have told you before, when you're sitting on a low seat you must keep your knees close to each other, and lean both of them together, either to the right or to the left, for the sake of decorum."

"But, Grandmamma, I've got on my drawers and my petticoat."

"Drawers are one thing, decorum is another," said Madame Alvarez. "Everything depends on the attitude."

"Yes, I know. Aunt Alicia has told me often enough," Gilberte murmured from under her tent of hair.

"I do not require the help of my sister," said Madame Alvarez testily, "to instruct you in the elements of propriety. On that subject, thank goodness, I know rather more than she does."

"Supposing you let me stay here with you today, Grandmamma, couldn't I go and see Aunt Alicia next Sunday?"

"What next!" said Madame Alvarez haughtily. "Have you any other *purposal* to make to me?"

"Yes, I have," said Gilberte. "Have my skirts made a little longer, so I don't have to fold myself up in a Z every time I sit down. You see, Grandmamma, with my skirts too short, I have to keep thinking of my you-know-what."

"Silence! Aren't you ashamed to call it your you-know-what?"

"I don't mind calling it by any other name, only . . ."

Madame Alvarez blew out the spirit-lamp, looked at the reflection of her heavy Spanish face in the looking-glass above the mantelpiece, and then laid down the law.

"There is no other name."

A skeptical look passed across the girl's eyes. Beneath the cockle-shells of fair hair they showed a lovely dark blue, the color of glistening slate. Gilberte unfolded with a bound.

"But, Grandmamma, all the same, do look! If only my skirts were just that much longer! Or if a small frill could be added!"

"That *would* be nice for your mother, to be seen with a great gawk looking at least eighteen! In her profession! Where are your brains!"

"In my head," said Gilberte. "Since I hardly ever go out with Mamma, what would it matter?"

She pulled down her skirt, which had rucked up towards her slim waist, and asked, "Can I go in my everyday coat? It's quite good enough."

"That wouldn't show that it's Sunday! Put on your serge coat and blue sailor-hat. When will you learn what's what?"

When on her feet, Gilberte was as tall as her grandmother. Madame Alvarez had taken the name of a Spanish lover now dead, and accordingly had acquired a creamy complexion, an ample bust, and hair lustrous with brilliantine. She used too white a powder, her heavy cheeks had begun to draw down her lower eyelids a little, and so eventually she took to calling herself Inez. Her family pursued their fixed orbit around her. Her unmarried daughter Andrée, forsaken by Gilberte's father, now preferred the sober life of a second-lead singer in a State-controlled theatre to the fitful opulence of a life of gallantry. Aunt Alicia—none of her admirers, it seemed, had ever mentioned marriage—lived alone, on an income she pretended was modest. The family had a high opinion of Alicia's judgment, and of her jewels.

Madame Alvarez looked her granddaughter up and down, from the felt sailor-hat trimmed with a quill to the ready-made cavalier shoes.

"Can't you ever manage to keep your legs together? When you stand like that, the Seine could flow between them. You haven't the shadow of a stomach, and yet you somehow contrive to stick it out. And don't forget your gloves, I beg of you."

Gilberte's every posture was still governed by the unconcern of childish innocence. At times she looked like Robin Hood, at others like a carved angel, or again like a boy in skirts; but she seldom resembled a nearly grown-up girl. "How can you expect to be put into long skirts, when you haven't the sense of a child of eight?" Madame Alvarez asked. And Andrée sighed, "I find Gilberte so discouraging." To which Gilberte answered quietly, "If you didn't find *me* discouraging, then you'd find something else." For she was sweet and gentle, resigned to a stay-at-home life and seeing few people outside the family. As for her features, no one could yet predict their final mould. A

large mouth, which showed beautiful strong white teeth when she laughed, no chin to speak of, and, between high cheekbones, a nose—"Heavens, where did she get that button?" whispered her mother under her breath. "If you can't answer that question, my girl, who can?" retorted Madame Alvarez. Whereupon Andrée, who had become prudish too late in life and disgruntled too soon, relapsed into silence, automatically stroking her sensitive larynx. "Gigi is just a bundle of raw material," Aunt Alicia affirmed, "it may turn out very well—and, just as easily, all wrong."

"Grandmamma, there's the bell! I'll open the door on my way out. Grandmamma," Gigi shouted from the passage, "It's Uncle Gaston!"

She came back into the room with a tall, youngish looking man, her arm linked through his, chattering to him with the childish pomposity of a school-girl out of class.

"What a pity it is, Tonton, that I've got to desert you so soon! Grandmamma wishes me to pay a call on Aunt Alicia. Which motor-car are you using today? Did you come in the new four-seater de Dion-Bouton with the collapsible hood? I hear it can be driven simply with one hand! Goodness, Tonton, those are smart gloves, and no mistake! So you've had a row with Liane, Tonton?"

"Gilberte," scolded Madame Alvarez, "what business of yours can that be?"

"But, Grandmamma, everybody knows about it. The whole story was in the *Gil Blas*. It began: *A secret bitterness is seeping into the sweet product of the sugarbeet*. . . . At school all the girls were asking me about it, for of course they know I know you. And I can tell you, Tonton, there's not a soul at school who takes Liane's side! They all agree that she's behaved disgracefully!"

"Gilberte!" repeated Madame Alvarez, "Say goodbye to Monsieur Lachaille, and run along!"

"Leave her alone, poor child," Gaston Lachaille sighed. "She, at any rate, intends no harm. And it's perfectly true that all's over between Liane and me. You're off to Aunt Alicia's, Gigi? Take my motor-car and send it back for me."

Gilberte gave a little cry, a jump of joy, and hugged Lachaille.

"Thank you, Tonton! Just think of Aunt Alicia's face! The concierge's eyes will be popping from her head!"

Off she went, with the clatter of a young filly not yet shod.

"You spoil her, Gaston," said Madame Alvarez.

But in this she was not altogether speaking the truth. Gaston Lachaille did not know how to "spoil" anyone—even himself. His luxuries were cut and dried: motor-cars, a dreary mansion on the Parc Monceau, Liane's monthly allowance and birthday jewels, champagne and baccarat at Deauville in the summer, at Monte Carlo in the winter. From time to time he would drop a fat check into some charity fund, or finance a new daily paper, or buy a yacht only to resell it almost at once to some Central European monarch: yet from none of this did he get any fun. He would say, as he looked at himself in the glass, "That's the face of a man who is branded." Because of his rather long nose and large dark eyes he was regarded on all sides as easy game. His commercial instinct and rich man's caution stood him in good stead, however; no one had succeeded in robbing him of his pearl studs, of his massive gold or silver cigarette-cases encrusted with precious stones, of his dark sable-lined topcoat.

From the window he watched his motor-car start up. That year, fashionable automobiles were being built with a slightly higher body and a rather wider top, to accommodate the exaggerated hats affected by Caroline Otero, Liane de Pougy, and other conspicuous figures of 1899: and, in consequence, they would sway gently at every turn of the wheel.

"Mamita," said Gaston Lachaille, "you wouldn't make me a cup of camomile?"

"Two rather than one," answered Madame Alvarez. "Sit down, my poor Gaston."

From the depths of a dilapidated armchair she removed some crumpled illustrated papers, a stocking waiting to be darned, and a box of liquorice candies known as *agents de change*. The jilted man settled down into the chair luxuriously, while his hostess put out the tray and two cups.

"Why does the camomile they brew at home always smell of faded chrysanthemums?" sighed Gaston.

"It's simply a matter of taking pains. You may not believe it,

Gaston, but I often pick my best camomile flowers in Paris, growing on waste ground, insignificant little flowers you would hardly notice. But they have a taste that is *unesteemable*. My goodness, what beautiful cloth your suit is made of! That deep-woven stripe is as smart as can be. Just the sort of material your father liked! But, I must confess, he would never have carried it so elegantly."

Never more than once during the course of a conversation did Madame Alvarez evoke the memory of an elder Lachaille, whom she claimed to have known intimately. From her former relationship, real or invented, she drew no advantage other than the close relationship of Gaston Lachaille, and the pleasure to be derived from watching a rich man enjoying the comforts of the poor when he made himself at home in her old armchair. Under their gas-blackened ceiling, these three feminine creatures never asked him for pearls, chinchillas, or solitaire diamonds, and they knew how to converse with tact and due solemnity on scandalous topics traditional and recondite. From the age of twelve, Gigi had known that Madame Otero's string of large black pearls were "dipped," that is to say, artificially tinted, while the three strings of her matchlessly graded pearl necklace were worth "a king's ransom"; that Madame de Pougy's seven rows lacked "life"; that Eugénie Fougère's famous diamond bolero was quite worthless; and that no self-respecting woman gadded about, like Madame Antokolski, in a coupé upholstered in mauve satin. She had obediently broken her friendship with a school friend, Lydia Poret, after the girl had shown her a solitaire, set as a ring, presented by the Baron Ephraim.

"A solitaire!" Madame Alvarez had exclaimed. "For a girl of fifteen! Her mother must be mad!"

"But, Grandmamma," pleaded Gigi, "it's not Lydia's fault if the Baron gave it to her!"

"Silence! I'm not blaming the Baron. The Baron knows what is expected of him. But plain common sense should have told the mother to put the ring in a safe at the bank, while waiting."

"While waiting for what, Grandmamma?"

"To see how things turn out."

"Why not in her jewel-case?"

"Because one never knows. Especially as the Baron is the sort of man who might change his mind. If, on the other hand, he has declared himself openly, Madame Poret has only to withdraw her daughter from her studies. Until the matter has been properly cleared up, you will oblige me by not walking home with that little Poret. Who ever heard of such a thing!"

"But supposing she marries, Grandmamma?"

"Marries? Marries whom, pray?"

"Why, the Baron!"

Madame Alvarez and her daughter exchanged glances of stupefaction. "I find the child so discouraging," Andrée had murmured. "She comes from another planet."

"My poor Gaston," said Madame Alvarez, "is it really true, then, that you have broken with her? In some ways, it may be the best thing for you; but in others, I'm sure you must find it most upsetting. Whom can one trust, I ask you!"

Poor Gaston listened while he drank the scalding camomile. The taste of it gave him as much comfort as the sight of the plaster-rose on the ceiling, still black from the hanging lamp now "converted to electricity," still faithfully retaining its shade—a vast frilly bell of palest green. Half the contents of a work-basket lay strewn over the dining-room table, from which Gilberte had forgotten to remove her copy-book. Above the upright piano hung an enlarged photograph of Gilberte at eight months, as a pendant to a portrait in oils of Andrée, dressed for her part in *Si j'étais Roi*. The perfectly inoffensive untidiness, the ray of spring sunshine coming through the point-lace curtains, the warmth given out by a little stove kept at a low heat,—all these homely things were like so many soothing potions to the nerves of a jilted and lonely millionaire.

"Are you positively in torment, my poor Gaston?"

"To be exact, I'm not in torment. I'm just very upset, as you say."

"I have no wish to appear inquisitive," said Madame Alvarez, "but how did it all happen? I've read the papers, of course; but can one believe what they say?"

Lachaille tugged at his small waxed moustache, and ran his fingers over his thick, cropped hair.

"Oh, much the same as on previous occasions. She waited for the birthday present, then off she trotted. And, into the bargain, she must needs go and bury herself in such a wretched little hole in Normandy—so stupid of her! Any fool could have discovered that there were only two rooms at the inn, one occupied by Liane, the other by Sandomir, a skating-instructor from the *Palais de Glace*."

"He's Polaire's tea-time waltzing partner, isn't he? Oh, women don't know where to draw the line nowadays! And just after her birthday, too! Oh! it's so tactless! What could be more unlady-like!"

Madame Alvarez stirred the teaspoon round and round in her cup, her little finger in the air. When she lowered her gaze, her lids did not quite cover her protuberant eyeballs, and her resemblance to George Sand became marked.

"I'd given her a rope," said Gaston Lachaille. "What you might call a rope—thirty-seven pearls. The middle one as big as the ball of my thumb."

He held out his white, beautifully manicured thumb, to which Madame Alvarez accorded the admiration due to a middle pearl.

"You certainly know how to do things in style," she said. "You came out of it extremely well, Gaston."

"I came out of it with a pair of horns, certainly."

Madame Alvarez did not seem to have heard him.

"If I were you, Gaston, I should try to get your own back on her. I should take up with some society lady."

"That's a nice pill to offer me," said Lachaille, who was absent-mindedly helping himself to the *agents de change*.

"Yes, indeed, I might even say that sometimes the cure may prove worse than the disease," Madame Alvarez continued, tactfully agreeing with him. "Out of the frying-pan into the fire." After which she respected Gaston Lachaille's silence.

The muffled sounds of a piano penetrated through the ceiling. Without a word, the visitor held out his empty cup, and Madame Alvarez refilled it.

"Is the family all right? What news of Aunt Alicia?"

"Oh, my sister, you know, is always the same. She's smart enough to keep herself to herself. She says she would rather live

in a splendid past than an ugly present. Her King of Spain, her Milan of Serbia, her Khedive, her rajahs by the half-dozen—or so she would have you believe! She is very considerate to Gigi. She finds her a trifle backward for her age, as indeed she is, and puts her through her paces. Last week, for instance, she taught her how to eat *homard à l'Américaine* in faultless style."

"Whatever for?"

"Alicia says it will be extremely useful. The three great difficulties in a girl's education, she maintains, are *homard à l'Américaine*, a boiled egg, and asparagus. Bad table manners, she says, have broken up many a happy home."

"That can happen," said Lachaille dreamily.

"Oh, Alicia is no fool! And it's just what Gigi requires—she is so greedy! If only her brain worked as well as her jaws! But she might well be a child of ten! And what breathtaking scheme have you got for the Battle of Flowers? Are you going to dazzle us again this year?"

"O Lord no!" groaned Gaston. "I shall take advantage of my misfortune, and save on the red roses."

Madame Alvarez wrung her hands.

"Oh, Gaston, you mustn't do that! If you're not there, the procession will look like a funeral!"

"I don't care what it looks like," said Gaston gloomily.

"You're never going to leave the prize banner to people like Valérie Cheniaguine? Oh, Gaston, we can't allow that!"

"You will have to. Valérie can very well afford it."

"Especially since she does it on the cheap. Gaston, do you know where she went for the ten thousand bunches thrown last year? She had three women tying them up for two days and two nights, and the flowers were bought in the flower market! In the market! Only the four wheels, and the coachman's whip, and the harness trappings bore the label of Lachaume."

"That's a dodge to remember!" said Lachaille, cheering up. "Good Lord! I've finished the liquorice!"

The tap-tap of Gilberte's marching footsteps could be heard crossing the outer room.

"Back already!" said Madame Alvarez. "What's the meaning of this?"

"The meaning," said the girl, "is that Aunt Alicia wasn't in good form. But I've been out in Tonton's 'tuf-tuf.' "

Her lips parted in a bright smile.

"You know, Tonton, all the time I was in your automobile, I put on a martyred expression—like this—as if I was bored to death with every luxury under the sun. I had the time of my life."

She sent her hat flying across the room, and her hair fell tumbling over her forehead and cheeks. She perched herself on a rather high stool, and tucked her knees up under her chin.

"Well, Tonton? You look as if you were dying of boredom. What about a game of piquet? It's Sunday, and Mamma doesn't come back between the two performances. Who's been eating all my liquorice? Oh, Tonton, you can't get away with that! The least you can do is to send me some more to make up for it."

"Gilberte, your manners!" scolded Madame Alvarez. "Your knees! Gaston hasn't the time to bother about your liquorice. Pull down your skirts. Gaston, would you like me to send her to her room?"

Young Lachaille, with one eye on the dirty pack of cards in Gilberte's hand, was longing simultaneously to give way to tears, to confide his sorrows, to go to sleep in the old armchair, and to play piquet.

"Let the child stay! In this room I can relax. It's restful. Gigi, I'll play you for twenty pounds of sugar."

"Your sugar's not very tempting. I much prefer sweets."

"It's the same thing. And sugar is better for you than sweets."

"You only say that because you make it."

"Gilberte, you forget yourself!"

A smile enlivened the mournful eyes of Gaston Lachaille.

"Let her say what she likes, Mamita. And if I lose, Gigi, what would you like? A pair of silk stockings?"

The corners of Gilberte's big childish mouth fell.

"Silk stockings make my legs itch. I would rather. . . ."

She raised the snub-nosed face of an angel towards the ceiling, put her head on one side, and tossed her curls from one cheek to the other.

"I would rather have an *eau-de-nil* Persephone corset, with

rococo roses embroidered on the garters. No, I'd rather have a music-case."

"Are you studying music now?"

"No, but my older friends at school carry their copy-books in music-cases, because it makes them look like students at the Conservatoire."

"Gilberte, you are making too free!" said Madame Alvarez.

"You shall have your case, and your liquorice. Cut, Gigi."

The next moment, the heir of Lachaille-Sugar was deep in the game. His prominent nose, large enough to appear false, and his slightly Negroid eyes did not in the least intimidate his opponent. With her elbows on the table, her shoulders on a level with her ears, and her blue eyes and red cheeks at their most vivid, she looked like a tipsy page. They both played passionately, almost in silence, exchanging occasional insults under their breath. "*You spindly spider! you sorrel run to seed!*" Lachaille muttered. "*You old crow's beak!*" the girl countered. The March twilight deepened over the narrow street.

"Please don't think I want you to go, Gaston," said Madame Alvarez, "but it's half-past seven. Will you excuse me while I just see about our dinner?"

"Half-past seven!" cried Lachaille, "and I'm supposed to be dining at Larue with de Dion, Feydeau, and one of the Barthous! This must be the last hand, Gigi."

"Why one of the Barthous?" asked Gilberte. "Are there several of them?"

"Two. One handsome and the other less so. The best known is the least handsome."

"That's not fair," said Gilberte. "And Feydeau, who's he?"

Lachaille plopped down his cards in amazement.

"Well, I declare! She doesn't know who Feydeau is! Don't you ever go to a play?"

"Hardly ever, Tonton."

"Don't you like the theatre?"

"I'm not mad about it. And Grandmamma and Aunt Alicia both say that going to plays prevents one from thinking about the serious side of life. Don't tell Grandmamma I told you."

She lifted the weight of her hair away from her ears, and let

it fall forward again. "Phew!" she sighed. "This mane does make me hot!"

"And what do they mean by the serious side of life?"

"Oh, I don't know it all off by heart, Uncle Gaston. And, what's more, they don't always agree about it. Grandmamma says: 'Don't read novels, they only depress you. Don't put on powder, it ruins the complexion. Don't wear stays, they spoil the figure. Don't dawdle and gaze at shop windows when you're by yourself. Don't get to know the families of your school friends, especially not the fathers who wait at the gates to fetch their daughters home from school.' "

She spoke very rapidly, panting between words like a child who has been running.

"And on top of that, Aunt Alicia goes off on another tack! I've reached the age when I can wear stays, and I should take lessons in dancing and deportment, and I should be aware of what's going on, and know the meaning of 'caret,' and not be taken in by the clothes that actresses wear. 'It's quite simple,' she tells me, 'of all the dresses you see on the stage, nineteen out of twenty would look ridiculous in the paddock.' In fact, my head is fit to split with it all! What will you be eating at Larue this evening, Tonton?"

"How should I know! *Filets de sole aux moules*, for a change. And of course, saddle of lamb with truffles. Do get on with the game, Gigi! I've got a point of five."

"That won't get you anywhere. I've got all the cards in the pack. Here, at home, we're having the warmed up remains of the *cassoulet*. I'm very fond of *cassoulet*."

"A plain dish of *cassoulet* with bacon rind," said Inez Alvarez modestly, as she came in. "Goose was exorbitant this week."

"I'll have one sent to you from Bon-Abri," said Gaston.

"Thank you very much, Gaston. Gigi, help Monsieur Lachaille on with his overcoat. Fetch him his hat and stick!"

When Lachaille had gone, rather sulky after a regretful sniff at the warmed up *cassoulet*, Madame Alvarez turned to her granddaughter.

"Will you please inform me, Gilberte, why it was you returned so early from Aunt Alicia's? I didn't ask you in front of Gaston."

Family matters must never be discussed in front of a third person, remember that!"

"There's no mystery about it, Grandmamma. Aunt Alicia was wearing her little lace cap to show me she had a headache. She said to me, 'I'm not very well.' I said to her, 'Oh! Then I mustn't tire you out, I'll go home again.' She said to me, 'Sit down and rest for five minutes.' 'Oh!' I said to her, 'I'm not tired. I drove here.' 'You drove here!' she said to me, raising her hands like this. As you may imagine, I had kept the motor-car waiting a few minutes, to show Aunt Alicia. 'Yes,' I said to her, 'The four-seater de-Dion-Bouton-with-the-collapsible-hood, which Tonton lent me while he was paying a call on us. He has had a rumpus with Liane.' 'Who do you think you're talking to?' she says to me, 'I've not yet got one foot in the grave! I'm still kept informed about public events when they're important. I know that he has had a rumpus with that great lamp-post of a woman. Well, you'd better run along home, and not bother about a poor ill old creature like me.' She waved to me from the window as I got into the motor-car."

Madame Alvarez pursed her lips.

"A poor ill old creature! She has never suffered so much as a cold in her life! I like that! What . . ."

"Grandmamma, do you think he'll remember my liquorice and the music-case?"

Madame Alvarez slowly lifted her heavy eyes towards the ceiling.

"Perhaps, my child, perhaps."

"But, as he lost, he owes them to me, doesn't he?"

"Yes, yes, he owes them to you. Perhaps you'll get them after all. Slip on your pinafore, and set the table. Put away your cards."

"Yes, Grandmamma. Grandmamma, what did he tell you about Madame Liane? Is it true she ran out on him with Sandomir and the rope of pearls?"

"In the first place, one doesn't say 'ran out on' anyone. In the second, come here and let me tighten your ribbon, so that your curls won't get soaked in the soup. And finally, the sayings and doings of a person who has broken the rules of etiquette are not

for your ears. These happen to be Gaston's private affairs."

"But, Grandmamma, they are no longer private, since everyone's talking about them, and the whole thing came out in *Gil Blas*."

"Silence! All you need to know is that the conduct of Madame Liane d'Exelmans has been the reverse of sensible. The ham for your mother is between two plates: you will put it in the larder."

Gilberte was asleep when her mother—Andrée Alvar, in small type on the Opéra-Comique play-bills—returned home. Madame Alvarez, the elder, seated at a game of patience, inquired from force of habit whether she was not too tired. Following polite family custom, Andrée reproached her mother for having waited up, and Madame Alvarez made her ritual reply.

"I shouldn't sleep in peace unless I knew you were in. There is some ham, and a little bowl of warm *cassoulet*. And some stewed prunes. The beer is on the window-sill."

"The child is in bed?"

"Of course."

Andrée Alvar made a solid meal—pessimists have good appetites. She still looked pretty in theatrical make-up. Without it, the rims of her eyes were pink and her lips colorless. For this reason, Aunt Alicia declared, Andrée never met with the admiration in real life that she gained on the stage.

"Did you sing well, my child?"

"Yes, I sang well. But where does it get me? All the applause goes to Tiphaine, as you may well imagine. Oh dear, oh dear, I really don't think I can bear to go on with this sort of life."

"It was your own choice. But you would bear it much better," said Madame Alvarez sententiously, "if you had someone! It's your loneliness that gets on your nerves, and you take such black views. You're behaving contrary to nature."

"Oh, Mother, don't start that all over again, I'm tired enough as it is. What news is there?"

"None. Everyone's talking of Gaston's break with Liane."

"Yes, they certainly are! Even in the green room at the Opéra-Comique, which can hardly be called up-to-date."

"It's an event of world-wide interest," said Madame Alvarez.

"Is there talk of who's in the running?"

"I should think not! It's far too recent. He is in full mourning, so to speak. Can you believe it, at a quarter to eight he was sitting exactly where you are now, playing a game of piquet with Gigi? He says he has no wish to attend the Battle of Flowers."

"Not really!"

"Yes. If he doesn't go, it will cause a great deal of talk. I advised him to think twice before taking such a decision."

"They were saying at the *Théâtre* that a certain music-hall artiste might stand a chance," said Andrée. "The one billed as the Cobra at the Olympia. It seems she does an acrobatic turn, and is brought on in a basket hardly big enough for a fox-terrier, and from this she uncurls like a snake."

Madame Alvarez protruded her heavy lower lip in contempt.

"What an idea! Gaston Lachaille has not sunk to that level! A music-hall performer! Do him the justice to admit that, as befits a bachelor of his standing, he has always confined himself to the great ladies of the profession."

"A fine pack of bitches!" murmured Andrée.

"Be more careful how you express yourself, my child. Calling people and things by their names has never done anyone any good. Gaston's mistresses have all had an air about them. A liaison with a great professional lady is the only suitable way for him to wait for a great marriage, always supposing that some day he does marry. Whatever may happen, we're in the front row when anything fresh turns up. Gaston has such confidence in me! I wish you had seen him asking me for camomile! A boy, a regular boy! Indeed, he is only thirty-three. And all that wealth weighs so heavily on his shoulders."

Andrée's pink eyelids blinked ironically.

"Pity him, Mother, if you like. I'm not complaining, but all the time we've known Gaston, he has never given you anything except his confidence."

"He owes us nothing. And thanks to him we've always had sugar for our jams, and, from time to time, for my *curaçao*; and birds from his farm, and odds and ends for the child."

"If you're satisfied with that!"

Madame Alvarez held high her majestic head.

"Perfectly satisfied. And even if I was not, what difference would it make?"

"In fact, as far as we're concerned, Gaston Lachaille, rich as he is, behaves as if he wasn't rich at all. Supposing we were in real straits! Would he come to our rescue, do you suppose?"

Madame Alvarez placed her hand on her heart.

"I'm convinced that he would," she said. And after a pause, she added, "But I would rather not have to ask him."

Andrée picked up the *Journal* again, in which there was a photograph of Liane the ex-mistress. "When you take a good look at her, she's not so extraordinary."

"You're wrong," retorted Madame Alvarez, "she is extraordinary. Otherwise she would not be so famous. Successes and celebrity are not a matter of luck. You talk like those scatter-brains who say, 'Seven rows of pearls would look every bit as well on me as on Madame de Pougy. She certainly cuts a dash—but so could I.' Such nonsense makes me laugh. Take what's left of the camomile to bathe your eyes."

"Thank you, Mother. Did the child go to Aunt Alicia's?"

"She did indeed, and in Gaston's motor-car, what's more! He lent it to her. It can go forty miles an hour, I believe! She was in seventh heaven."

"Poor lamb, I wonder what she'll make of her life. She's quite capable of ending up as a mannequin or a saleswoman. She's so backward. At her age, I—"

There was no indulgence in the glance Madame Alvarez gave her daughter.

"Don't boast too much about what you were doing when you were her age. If I remember rightly, at her age you were snapping your fingers at Monsieur Mennesson and all his flour-mills, though he was perfectly ready to make you your fortune. Instead, you must needs bolt with a wretched music master."

Andrée Alvar kissed her mother's lustrous plaits.

"My darling mother, don't curse me at this hour, I'm so sleepy. Goodnight, Mother. I've a rehearsal tomorrow at a quarter to one. I'll eat at the dairy during the entr'acte; don't bother about me."

She yawned and walked in the dark through the little room

where her daughter was asleep. All she could see of Gilberte in the obscurity was a bush of hair and the Russian braid of her nightdress. She locked herself into the exiguous bathroom and, late though it was, lit the gas under a kettle. Madame Alvarez had instilled into her progeny, among other virtues, a respect for certain rites. One of her maxims was, "You can, at a pinch, leave the face till the morning, when travelling or pressed for time. For a woman, attention to the lower parts is the first law of self-respect."

The last to go to bed, Madame Alvarez was the first to rise, and allowed the daily cleaning woman no hand in preparing the breakfast coffee. She slept in the dining-sitting room, on a divan-bed, and, at the stroke of half-past seven, she opened the door to the papers, the quart of milk, and the daily maid—who was carrying the others. By eight o'clock she had taken out her curling-pins, and her beautiful coils of hair were dressed and smooth. At ten minutes to nine, Gilberte left for school, clean and tidy, her hair well-brushed. At ten o'clock Madame Alvarez was "thinking about" the midday meal, that is, she got into her mackintosh, slipped her arm through the handle of her shopping net, and set off to market.

Today, as on all other days, she made sure that her granddaughter would not be late; she placed the coffee-pot and the jug of milk piping hot on the table, and unfolded the newspaper while waiting for her. Gilberte came in fresh as a flower, smelling of lavender-water, with some vestiges of sleep still clinging to her. A cry from Madame Alvarez made her fully wide awake.

"Call your mother, Gigi! Liane d'Exelmans has committed suicide."

The child replied with a long drawn-out "Oooh!" and asked, "Is she dead?"

"Of course not. She knows what she's about."

"How did she do it, Grandmamma? A revolver?"

Madame Alvarez looked pityingly at her granddaughter.

"The idea! Laudanam, as usual. *'Doctors Morèze and Pelledoux, who have never left the heart-broken beauty's bedside, cannot yet answer for her life, but their diagnosis is reassur-*

ing . . . My own diagnosis is that if Madame d'Exelmans goes on playing that game, she'll end by ruining her stomach."

"The last time she killed herself, Grandmamma, was for the sake of Prince Georgevitch, wasn't it?"

"Where are your brains, my darling? It was for Count Berthou de Sauveterre."

"Oh, so it was. And what will Tonton do now, do you think?"

A dreamy look passed across the huge eyes of Madame Alvarez.

"It's a toss-up, my child. We shall know everything in good time, even if he starts by refusing to give an interview to anybody. You must always start by refusing to give an interview to anybody. Then later you can fill the front page. Tell the concierge, by the way, to get us the evening papers. Have you had enough to eat? Did you have your second cup of milk, and your two pieces of bread and butter? Put on your gloves before you go out. Don't dawdle on the way. I'm going to call your mother. What a story! Andrée, are you asleep? Oh, so you're out of bed! Andrée, Liane has committed suicide!"

"That's a nice change," muttered Andrée. "She has only the one idea in her head, that woman, but she sticks to it."

"You've not taken out your curlers yet, Andrée?"

"And have my hair go limp in the middle of rehearsal? No thank you!"

Madame Alvarez ran her eyes over her daughter, from the spiky tips of her curlers to the felt slippers. "It's plain that there's no man here for you to bother about, my child! A man in the house soon cures a woman of traipsing about in dressing-gown and slippers. What an excitement, this suicide! Unsuccessful, of course."

Andrée's pallid lips parted in a contemptuous smile: "It's getting too boring—the way she takes laudanum as if it was castor oil!"

"Anyhow, who cares about her? It's the Lachaille heir who matters. This is the first time such a thing has happened to him. He's already had—let me see. He's had Gentiane, who stole his private papers; then that foreigner, who tried to force him into

marriage, but Liane is his first suicide. In such circumstances, a man so much in the public eye has to be extremely careful about what line he takes."

"Hm! He'll be bursting with pride, you may be sure."

"And with good reason, too," said Madame Alvarez. "We shall be seeing great things before very long. I wonder what Alicia will have to say about the situation."

"She'll do her best to make a mountain of a molehill."

"Alicia is no angel. But I must confess that she is long-sighted. And that without ever leaving her room!"

"She's no need to, since she has the telephone. Mother, won't you have one put in here?"

"It's expensive," said Madame Alvarez, thoughtfully. "We only just manage to make both ends meet, as it is. The telephone is of real use only to important businessmen, or to women who have something to hide. Now, if you were to change your mode of life—and I'm only putting it forward as a supposition—and if Gigi were to start on a life of her own, I should be the first to say, 'We'll have the telephone put in.' But we haven't reached that point yet, unfortunately."

She allowed herself a single sigh, pulled on her rubber gloves, and coolly set about her household chores. Thanks to her care, the modest flat was growing old without too many signs of deterioration. She retained, from her past life, the honorable habits of women who have lost their honour, and these she taught to her daughter and her daughter's daughter. Sheets never stayed on the beds longer than ten days, and the combination char- and washerwoman told everyone that the chemises and drawers of the ladies of Madame Alvarez' household were changed more often than she could count, and so where the table napkins. At any moment, at the cry of "Gigi, take off your shoes!" Gilberte had to remove shoes and stockings, exhibit white feet to the closest inspection, and announce the least suspicion of a corn.

During the week following Madame d'Exelmans' suicide, Lachaille's reactions were somewhat incoherent. He engaged the stars of the National Musical Academy to dance at a midnight

fête held at his own house, and, wishing to give a supper party at the Pré-Catalan, he arranged for that restaurant to open a fortnight earlier than was their custom. The clowns, Footit *et* Chocolat, did a turn: Rita del Erido caracoled on horseback between the supper tables, wearing a divided skirt of white lace flounces, a white hat on her black hair with white ostrich feathers frothing round the relentless beauty of her face. Indeed, Paris mistakenly proclaimed, such was her beauty, that Gaston Lachaille was hoisting her astride a throne of sugar. Twenty-four hours later, Paris was undeceived. For in the false prophecies it had published, *Gil Blas* nearly lost the subsidy it received from Gaston Lachaille. A specialized weekly, *Paris en amour*, provided another red herring, under the headline: "Young Yankee millionairess makes no secret of weakness for French sugar."

Madame Alvarez' ample bust shook with incredulous laughter when she read the daily papers: she had received her information from none other than Gaston Lachaille in person. Twice in ten days, he had found time to drop in for a cup of camomile, to sink into the depths of the now sagging conch-shaped armchair, and there forget his business worries and his dislike of being unattached. He even brought Gigi an absurd Russian leather music-case with a silver-gilt clasp, and twenty boxes of liquorice. Madame Alvarez was given a *pâté de foie gras* and six bottles of champagne, and of these bounties Tonton Lachaille partook by inviting himself to dinner. Throughout the meal, Gilberte regaled them rather tipsily with tittle-tattle about her school, and later won Gaston's gold pencil at piquet. He lost with good grace, recovered his spirits, laughed, and, pointing to the child, said to Madame Alvarez, "There's my best pal!" Madame Alvarez' Spanish eyes moved with slow watchfulness from Gigi's reddened cheeks and white teeth to Lachaille, who was pulling her hair by the fistful. "You little devil, you had the fourth king up your sleeve all the time!"

It was at this moment that Andrée, coming back from the Opéra-Comique, looked at Gigi's disheveled head rolling against Lachaille's sleeve, and saw the tears of excited laughter in her lovely slate-blue eyes. She said nothing, and accepted a glass of champagne, then another, and yet another. After her third glass,

Gaston Lachaille was threatened with the Bell Song from *Lakmé*, at which point Andrée's mother led her away to bed.

The following day, no one spoke of this family party except Gilberte, who exclaimed, "Never, never in all my life, have I laughed so much! And the pencil is real gold!" Her unreserved chatter met with a strange silence, or rather with "Now then, Gigi, try to be a little more serious!" thrown out almost absent-mindedly.

After that, Gaston Lachaille let a fortnight go by without giving a sign of life, and the Alvarez family gathered its information from the papers only.

"Did you see, Andrée? In the Gossip Column it says that Monsieur Gaston Lachaille has left for Monte Carlo. *The reason for this seems to be of a sentimental nature—a secret that we respect.* What next!"

"Would you believe it, Grandmamma, Lydia Poret was saying at the dancing class that Liane travelled on the same train as Tonton, but in another compartment! Grandmamma, do you think it can be true?"

Madame Alvarez shrugged her shoulders.

"If it was true, how on earth would those Porets know? Have they become friends with Monsieur Lachaille all of a sudden?"

"No, but Lydia Poret heard the story in her aunt's dressing room at the Comédie Française."

Madame Alvarez exchanged looks with her daughter.

"In her dressing room! That explains everything!" she exclaimed, for she held the theatrical profession in contempt, although Andrée worked so hard. When Madame Emilienne d'Alençon had decided to present performing rabbits, and Madame de Pougy—shyer on the stage than any young girl—had amused herself by miming the part of Columbine in spangled black tulle, Madame Alvarez had stigmatised them both in a single phrase, "What! have they sunk to that?"

"Grandmamma, tell me, Grandmamma, do you know him, this Prince Radziwill?" Gilberte went on again.

"What's come over the child today? Has she been bitten by a flea? Which Prince Radziwill, to begin with? There's more than one."

"I don't know," said Gigi. "The one who's getting married. Among the list of presents, it says here, '*are three writing-sets in malachite.*' What is malachite?"

"Oh, you're being tiresome, child. If he's getting married, he's no longer interesting."

"But if Tonton got married, wouldn't he be interesting either?"

"It all depends. It would be interesting if he were to marry his mistress. When Prince Cheniaguine married Valérie d'Aigreville, it was obvious that the life she had led him for the past fifteen years was all he wanted; scenes, plates flung across the room, and reconciliations in the middle of the restaurant Durand, Place de la Madeleine. Clearly, she was a woman who knew how to make herself valued. But all that is too complicated for you, my poor Gigi."

"And do you think it's to marry Liane that they've gone away together?"

Madame Alvarez pressed her forehead against the window pane, and seemed to be consulting the spring sunshine, which bestowed upon the street a sunny side and one with shade.

"No," she said, "not if I know anything about anything. I must have a word with Alicia. Gigi, come with me as far as her house; you can leave me there and find your way back along the quais. It will give you some fresh air, since, it would seem, one must have fresh air nowadays. I have never been in the habit of taking the air more than twice a year, myself, at Cabourg and at Monte Carlo. And I am none the worse for that."

That evening Madame Alvarez came in so late that the family dined off tepid soup, cold meat, and some cakes sent round by Aunt Alicia. To Gilberte's "Well, what did she have to say?" she presented an icy front, and answered in clarion tones.

"She says that she is going to teach you how to eat ortolans."

"Lovely!" cried Gilberte. "And what did she say about the summer frock she promised me?"

"She said she would see. And that there's no reason why you should be displeased with the result."

"Oh!" said Gilberte, gloomily.

"She also wants you to go to luncheon with her on Thursday, sharp at twelve."

"With you, too, Grandmamma?"

Madame Alvarez looked at the willowy slip of a girl facing her across the table, at her high, rosy cheekbones beneath eyes as blue as an evening sky, at her strong even teeth biting a fresh-colored but slightly chapped lip, and at the primitive splendor of her ash-gold hair.

"No," she said at last. "Without me."

Gilberte got up and wound an arm about her grandmother's neck.

"The way you said that, Grandmamma, surely doesn't mean that you're going to send me to live with Aunt Alicia? I don't want to leave here, Grandmamma!"

Madame Alvarez cleared her throat, gave a little cough, and smiled.

"Goodness gracious! what a foolish creature you are! Leave here! Why, my poor Gigi, I'm not scolding you, but you've not reached the first stage towards leaving."

For a bell-pull, Aunt Alicia had hung from her front door a length of bead-embroidered braid on a background of twining green vine-leaves and purple grapes. The door itself, varnished and revarnished till it glistened, shone with the glow of a dark brown caramel. From the very threshold, where she was admitted by a "man-servant," Gilberte enjoyed in her indiscriminating way an atmosphere of discreet luxury. The carpet, spread with Persian rugs, seemed to lend her wings. After hearing Madame Alvarez pronounce her sister's Louis XV little drawing room to be "boredom itself," Gilbert echoed her words by saying: "Aunt Alicia's drawing room is very pretty, but it's boredom itself!" reserving her admiration for the dining room, furnished in pale almost golden lemon wood dating from the Directoire, quite plain but for the grain of a wood as transparent as wax. "I shall buy myself a set like that one day," Gigi had once said in all innocence.

"In the Faubourg Antoine, I dare say," Aunt Alicia had answered teasingly, with a smile of her cupid's bow mouth and a flash of small teeth.

She was seventy years old. Her fastidious taste was everywhere

apparent: in her silver-grey bedroom with its red Chinese vases, in her narrow white bathroom as warm as a hot-house, and in her robust health, concealed by a pretence of delicacy. The men of her generation, when trying to describe Alicia de Saint-Efflam, fumbled for words and could only exclaim, "Ah, my dear fellow!" or "Nothing could give you the faintest idea . . ." Those who had known her intimately produced photographs which younger men found ordinary enough. "Was she really so lovely? You wouldn't think so from her photographs!" Looking at portraits of her, old admirers would pause for an instant, recollecting the turn of a wrist like a swan's neck, the tiny ear, the profile revealing a delicious kinship between the heart-shaped mouth and the wide-cut eyelids with their long lashes.

Gilberte kissed the pretty old lady, who was wearing a peak of black Chantilly lace on her white hair, and, on her slightly dumpy figure, a tea-gown of shot taffeta.

"You have one of your headaches, Aunt Alicia?"

"I'm not sure yet," replied Aunt Alicia, "it depends on the luncheon. Come quickly, the eggs are ready! Take off your coat! What on earth is that dress?"

"One of Mamma's, altered to fit me. Are they difficult eggs today?"

"Not at all. *Oeufs brouillés aux croutons*. The ortolans are not difficult, either. And you shall have chocolate cream. So shall I."

With her young voice, a touch of pink on her amiable wrinkles, and lace on her white hair, Aunt Alicia was the perfect stage marquise. Gilberte had the greatest reverence for her aunt. In sitting down to table in her presence, she would pull her skirt up behind, join her knees, hold her elbows close to her sides, straighten her shoulder blades, and to all appearances become the perfect young lady. She would remember what she had been taught, break her bread quickly, eat with her mouth shut, and take care, when cutting her meat, not to let her fore-finger reach the blade of her knife.

Today her hair, severely tied back in a heavy knot at the nape of her neck, disclosed the fresh line of her forehead and ears, and a very powerful throat, rising from the rather ill-cut opening of her altered dress. This was a dingy blue, the bodice

pleated about a let-in piece, and to cheer up this patchwork, three rows of mohair braid had been sewn round the hem of the skirt, and three times three rows of mohair braid round the sleeves, between the wrist and the elbow.

Aunt Alicia, sitting opposite her grand-niece and examining her through fine dark eyes, could find no fault.

"How old are you?" she asked suddenly.

"The same as I was the other day, Aunt. Fifteen and a half. Aunt, what do you really think of this business of Tonton Gaston?"

"Why? Does it interest you?"

"Of course, Aunt. It worries me. If Tonton takes up with another lady, he won't come and play piquet with us any more or drink camomile tea—at least not for some time. That would be a shame."

"That's one way of looking at it, certainly."

Aunt Alicia examined her niece critically, through narrowed eyelids.

"Do you work hard, in class? Who are your friends? Ortolans should be cut in two, with one quick stroke of the knife, and no grating of the blade on the plate. Bite up each half. The bones don't matter. Go on eating while you answer my question, but don't talk with your mouth full. You must manage it. If I can, you can. What friends have you made?"

"None, Aunt. Grandmamma won't even let me have tea with the families of my school friends."

"She is quite right. Apart from that, there is no one who follows you, no little clerk hanging round your skirts? No school-boy? No older man? I warn you, I shall know at once if you lie to me."

Gilberte gazed at the bright face of the imperious old lady who was questioning her so sharply.

"Why, no, Aunt, no one. Has somebody been telling you tales about me? I am always on my own. And why does Grandmamma stop me from accepting invitations?"

"She is right, for once. You would only be invited by ordinary people, that is to say, useless people."

"And what about us? Aren't we ordinary people ourselves?"

"No."

"What makes these ordinary people inferior to us?"

"They have weak heads and dissolute bodies. Besides, they are married. But I don't think you understand."

"Yes, Aunt, I understand that we don't marry."

"Marriage is not forbidden to us. Instead of marrying 'at once,' it sometimes happens that we marry 'at last.'"

"But does that prevent me from seeing girls of my own age?"

"Yes. Are you bored at home? Well, be a little bored. It's not a bad thing. Boredom helps one to make decisions. What is the matter? Tears? The tears of a silly child who is backward for her age. Have another ortolan."

Aunt Alicia, with three glittering fingers, grasped the stem of her glass and raised it in a toast.

"To you and me, Gigi! You shall have an Egyptian cigarette with your coffee. On condition that you do not wet the end of your cigarette, and that you don't spit out specks of tobacco—going *ptu, ptu*. I shall also give you a note to the *première vendeuse* at Béchoff-David, an old friend of mine who was not a success. Your wardrobe is going to be changed. Nothing venture, nothing gain."

The dark blue eyes gleamed. Gilberte stammered with joy.

"Aunt! Aunt! I'm going to . . . to Bé—"

"—choff-David. But I thought you weren't interested in clothes?"

Gilberte blushed.

"Aunt, I'm not interested in home-made clothes."

"I sympathize with you. Can it be that you have taste? When you think of looking your best, how do you see yourself dressed?"

"Oh, but I know just what would suit me, Aunt! I've seen—"

"Explain yourself without gestures. The moment you gesticulate you look common."

"I've seen a dress . . . oh, a dress created for Madame Lucy Gérard! Hundreds of tiny ruffles of pearl-grey silk muslin from top to bottom. And then a dress of lavender-blue cloth cut out on a black velvet foundation, the cut-out design making a sort of peacock's tail on the train."

The small hand with its precious stones flashed through the air.

"Enough! Enough! I see your fancy is to be dressed like a leading *comédienne* at the Théâtre Française,—and don't take that as a compliment! Come and pour out the coffee. And without jerking up the lip of the coffee-pot to prevent the drop from falling. I'd rather have a foot-bath in my saucer than see you juggling like a waiter in a café."

The next hour passed very quickly for Gilberte: Aunt Alicia had unlocked a casket of jewels to use for a lesson that dazzled her.

"What is that, Gigi?"

"A marquise diamond."

"We say, a marquise-shaped brilliant. And that?"

"A topaz."

Aunt Alicia threw up her hands and the sunlight, glancing off her rings, set off a myriad scintillations.

"A topaz! I have suffered many humiliations, but this surpasses them all. A topaz among my jewels! Why not an aquamarine or a chrysolite? It's a yellow diamond, little goose, and you won't often see its like. And this?"

Gilberte half opened her mouth, as if in a dream.

"Oh! That's an emerald. Oh, how beautiful it is!"

Aunt Alicia slipped the large square-cut emerald on one of her thin fingers and was lost in silence.

"Do you see," she said in a hushed voice, "that almost blue flame darting about in the depths of the green light? Only the most beautiful emeralds contain that miracle of elusive blue."

"Who gave it to you, Aunt?" Gilberte dared to ask.

"A king," said Aunt Alicia simply.

"A great king?"

"No. A little one. Great kings do not give very fine stones."

"Why not?"

For a fleeting moment, Aunt Alicia proffered a glimpse of her tiny white teeth.

"If you want my opinion, it's because they don't want to. Between ourselves, the little ones don't either."

"Then who does give great big stones?"

"Who? The shy. The proud, too. And the bounders, because they think that to give a monster jewel is a sign of good breeding. Sometimes a woman does, to humiliate a man. Never wear second-rate jewels, wait till the really good ones come to you."

"And if they don't?"

"Well, then it can't be helped. Rather than a wretched little diamond full of flaws, wear a simple, plainly inexpensive ring. In that case you can say, 'It's a memento. I never part with it, day or night.' Don't ever wear artistic jewelry, it wrecks a woman's reputation."

"What is an artistic jewel?"

"It all depends. A mermaid in gold with eyes of chrysophrase. An Egyptian scarab. A large engraved amethyst. A not very heavy bracelet said to have been chased by a master-hand. A lyre or star, mounted as a brooch. A studded tortoise. In a word, all of them, frightful. Never wear baroque pearls, not even as hat-pins. Beware, above all things, of family jewels!"

"But Grandmamma has a beautiful cameo, set as a medallion."

"There are no beautiful cameos," said Alicia, with a toss of the head. "There are precious stones and pearls. There are white, yellow, blue, blue-white or pink diamonds. We won't speak of black diamonds, they're not worth mentioning. Then there are rubies—when you can be sure of them; sapphires, when they come from Kashmir; emeralds, provided they have no fatal flaw, or are not too light in color, or have a yellowish tint."

"Aunt, I'm very fond of opals, too."

"I am very sorry, but you are not to wear them. I won't allow it."

Dumbfounded, Gilberte remained for a moment open-mouthed.

"Oh! Do you too, Aunt, really believe that they bring bad luck?"

"Why in the world not? You silly little creature," Alicia went bubbling on, "you must pretend to believe in such things. Believe in opals, believe—let's see, what can I suggest—in turquoises that die, in the evil eye . . ."

"But," said Gigi, haltingly, "those are . . . are superstitions!"

"Of course they are, child. They also go by the name of weak-

nesses. A pretty little collection of weaknesses, and a terror of spiders, are indispensable stock-in-trade with men."

"Why, Aunt?"

The old lady closed the casket, and kept Gilberte kneeling before her.

"Because nine men out of ten are superstitious, nineteen out of twenty believe in the evil eye, and ninety-eight out of a hundred are afraid of spiders. They forgive us—oh! for many things, but not for the absence in us of their own failings," she said.

"What makes you sigh?"

"I shall never remember all that!"

"The important thing is not for *you* to remember, but for me to know it."

"Aunt, what is a writing-set in . . . in malachite?"

"Always a calamity. But where on earth did you pick up such terms?"

"From the list of presents at grand weddings, Aunt, printed in the papers."

"Nice reading! But, at least you can gather from it what kind of presents you should never give, or accept."

While speaking, she began to touch here and there the young face on a level with her own, with the sharp pointed nail of her index finger. She lifted one slightly chapped lip, inspected the spotless enamel of the teeth.

"A fine jaw, my girl! With such teeth, I should have gobbled up Paris, and the rest of the world into the bargain. As it was, I had a good bite out of it. What's this you've got here? A small pimple? You shouldn't have a small pimple near your nose. And this? You've pinched a blackhead. You've no business to have such things, or to pinch them. I'll give you some of my astringent lotion. You musn't eat anything from the pork-butchers' except cooked ham. You don't put on powder?"

"Grandmamma won't let me."

"I should hope not. You go you-know-where regularly? Let me smell your breath. Not that it means anything at this hour, you've just had luncheon."

She laid her hands on Gigi's shoulders.

"Pay attention to what I'm going to say. You have it in your

power to please. You have an impossible little nose, a nondescript mouth, cheeks rather like the wife of a moujik—”

“Oh, Aunt!” sighed Gilberte.

“But, with your eyes and eyelashes, your teeth, and your hair, you can get away with it, if you’re not a perfect fool. As for the rest—”

She cupped her hands like conch-shells over Gigi’s bosom and smiled.

“A promise, but a pretty promise, neatly moulded. Don’t eat too many almonds, they add weight to the breasts. Ah! remind me to teach you how to choose cigars.”

Gilberte opened her eyes so wide that the tips of her lashes touched her eyebrows.

“Why?”

She received a little tap on the cheek.

“Because—because I do nothing without good reason. If I take you in hand at all, I must do it thoroughly. Once a woman understands the tastes of a man, cigars included, and once a man knows what pleases a woman, they may be said to be well matched.”

“And then they fight,” concluded Gigi with a knowing air.

“What do you mean, they fight?”

The old lady looked at Gigi in consternation.

“Ah!” she added, “You certainly never invented the triple mirror! Come, you little psychologist! Let me give you a note for Madame Henriette at Béchoff.”

While her aunt was writing at a miniature rose-pink *escritoire*, Gilberte breathed in the scent of the fastidiously furnished room. Without wanting them for herself, she examined the objects she knew so well but hardly appreciated: Cupid, the Archer, pointing to the hours on the mantelpiece; two rather daring pictures; a bed like the basin of a fountain and its chinchilla coverlet; a rosary of small seed pearls and the New Testament on the bedside table; two red Chinese vases fitted as lamps—a happy note against the grey of the walls.

“Run along, my little one. I shall send for you again quite soon. Don’t forget to ask Victor for the cake you’re to take home. Gently, don’t disarrange my hair! And remember, I shall

have my eye on you as you leave the house. Woe betide you if you march like a guardsman, or drag your feet behind you!"

The month of May fetched Gaston Lachaille back to Paris, and brought to Gilberte two well-cut dresses and a light-weight coat—"a sack-coat like Cléo de Mérode's" she called it—as well as hats and boots and shoes. To these she added, on her own account, a few curls over the forehead, which cheapened her appearance. She paraded in front of Gaston in a blue and white dress reaching almost to the ground. "A full seven and a half yards round, Tonton, my skirt measures!" She was more than proud of her slender waist, held in by a grosgrain sash with a silver buckle; but she tried every dodge to free her lovely strong neck from its whale-bone collar of "imitation Venetian point" which matched the tucks of the bodice. The full sleeves and wide flounced skirt of blue and white striped silk rustled deliciously, and Gilberte delighted in picking at the sleeves, to puff them out just below the shoulder.

"You remind me of a performing monkey," Lachaille said to her. "I liked you much better in your old tartan dress. In that uncomfortable collar you look just like a hen with a full crop. Take a peep at yourself!"

Feeling a little ruffled, Gilberte turned round to face the looking-glass. She had a lump in one of her cheeks caused by a large caramel, out of a box sent all the way from Nice at Gaston's order.

"I've heard a good deal about you, Tonton," she retorted, "but I've never heard it said that you had any taste in clothes."

He stared, almost choking, at this newly fledged young woman, then turned to Madame Alvarez.

"Charming manners you've taught her! I congratulate you!"

Whereupon he left the house without drinking his camomile tea, and Madame Alvarez wrung her hands.

"Look what you've done to us now, my poor Gigi!"

"I know," said Gigi, "but then why does he fly at me? He must know by now, I should think, that I can give as good as I get!"

Her grandmother shook her by the arm.

"But think what you've done, you wretched child! Good heavens! when will you learn to think? You've mortally offended the man, as likely as not. Just when we are doing our utmost to—"

"To do what, Grandmamma?"

"Why! to do everything, to make an elegant young lady of you, to show you off to advantage."

"For whose benefit, Grandmamma? You must admit that one doesn't have to turn oneself inside out for an old friend like Tonton!"

But Madame Alvarez admitted nothing; not even to her astonishment, when, the following day, Gaston Lachaille arrived in the best of spirits, wearing a light colored suit.

"Put on your hat, Gigi! I'm taking you out to tea."

"Where?" cried Gigi.

"To the *Réservoirs*, at Versailles!"

"Hurrah! Hurrah! Hurrah!" chanted Gilberte.

She turned towards the kitchen.

"Grandmamma, I'm having tea at the *Réservoirs*, with Tonton!"

Madame Alvarez appeared, and without stopping to untie the flowered satinette apron across her stomach, interposed her soft hand between Gilberte's arm and that of Gaston Lachaille.

"No, Gaston," she said simply.

"What do you mean, No?"

"Oh! Grandmamma!" wailed Gigi.

Madame Alvarez seemed not to hear her.

"Go to your room a minute, Gigi. I should like to talk to Monsieur Lachaille in private."

She watched Gilberte leave the room and close the door behind her; then, returning to Gaston, she met his dark, rather brutal stare without flinching.

"What is the meaning of all this, Mamita? Ever since yesterday, I find quite a change here. What's going on?"

"I shall be glad if you will sit down, Gaston, I'm tired," said Madame Alvarez. "Oh, my poor legs!"

She sighed, waited for a response that did not come, and then

untied her apron, under which she was wearing a black dress with a large cameo pinned upon it. She motioned her guest to a high-backed chair, keeping the armchair for herself. Then she sat down heavily, smoothed her greying black coils, and folded her hands on her lap. The unhurried movement of her large dark lambent eyes, and the ease with which she remained motionless, were sure signs of her self-control.

"Gaston, you cannot doubt my friendship for you!" Lachaille emitted a short, businesslike laugh, and tugged at his moustache. "My friendship and my gratitude. Nevertheless, I must never forget that I have a soul entrusted to my care. Andrée, as you know, has neither the time nor the inclination to look after the girl. Our Gilberte has not got the gumption to make her own way in the world, like so many. She is just a child."

"Of sixteen," said Lachaille.

"Of nearly sixteen," consented Madame Alvarez. "For years you have been giving her sweets and playthings. She swears by Tonton, and by him alone. And now you want to take her out to tea, in your automobile, to the *Réservoirs*!"

Madame Alvarez placed a hand on her heart.

"Upon my soul and conscience, Gaston, if there were only you and me, I should say to you, 'Take Gilberte anywhere you like, I entrust her to you blindly.' But there are always the others. The eyes of the world are on you. To be seen tête-à-tête with you, is, for a woman—"

Gaston Lachaille lost patience.

"All right, all right, I understand. You want me to believe that once she is seen having tea with me, Gilberte is compromised! A slip of a girl, a flapper, a chit whom no one knows, whom no one notices!"

"Let us say, rather," interrupted Madame Alvarez gently, "that she will be labeled. No matter where you put in an appearance, Gaston, your presence is remarked upon. A young girl who goes out alone with you is no longer an ordinary girl, or even—to put it bluntly—a respectable girl. Now our little Gilberte must not, above all things, cease to be an ordinary young girl, at least not by that method. So far as it concerns you, it will simply end

in one more story to be added to the long list already in existence but, personally, when I read of it in *Gil Blas*, I shall not be amused."

Gaston Lachaille rose, paced from the table to the door, then from the door to the window, before replying.

"Very good, Mamita, I have no wish to vex you. I shan't argue," he said coldly. "Keep your precious child."

He turned round again to face Madame Alvarez, his chin held high.

"I can't help wondering, as a matter of interest, whom you are keeping her for! A clerk earning a hundred a year, who'll marry her and give her four children in three years?"

"I know the duty of a mother better than that," said Madame Alvarez composedly. "I shall do my best to entrust Gigi only to the care of a man capable of saying, 'I take charge of her and answer for her future.' May I have the pleasure of brewing you some camomile tea, Gaston?"

"No, thank you. I'm late already."

"Would you like Gigi to come and say goodbye?"

"Don't bother, I'll see her another time. I can't say when, I'm sure. I'm very much taken up these days."

"Never mind, Gaston, don't worry about her. Have a good time, Gaston."

Once alone, Madame Alvarez mopped her forehead, and went to open the door of Gilberte's room.

"You were listening at the door, Gigi!"

"No, Grandmamma."

"Yes, you had your ear to the key-hole. You must never listen at key-holes. You don't hear properly and so you get things all wrong. Monsieur Lachaille has gone."

"So I can see," said Gilberte.

"Now you must rub the new potatoes in a cloth. I'll sauté them when I come in."

"Are you going out, Grandmamma?"

"I'm going round to see Alicia."

"Again?"

"Is it your place to object?" said Madame Alvarez severely.

"You had better bathe your eyes in cold water, since you have been silly enough to cry."

"Grandmamma!"

"What?"

"What difference could it make to you, if you'd let me go out with Tonton Gaston in my new dress?"

"Silence! If you can't understand anything about anything, at least let those who are capable of using their reason do so for you. And put on my rubber gloves before you touch the potatoes!"

Throughout the whole of the following week, silence reigned over the Alvarez household, except for a surprise visit, one day, from Aunt Alicia. She arrived in a hired brougham, all black lace and dull silk with a rose at her shoulder, and carried on an anxious conversation, strictly between themselves, with her younger sister. As she was leaving, she bestowed only a moment's attention on Gilberte, pecked at her cheek with a fleeting kiss, and was gone.

"What did she want?" Gilberte asked Madame Alvarez.

"Oh, nothing . . . the address of the heart specialist who treated Madame Buffetery."

Gilberte reflected for a moment.

"It was a long one," she said.

"What was long?"

"The address of the heart specialist. Grandmamma, I should like a *cachet*. I have a headache."

"But you had one yesterday. A headache doesn't last forty-eight hours!"

"Presumably my headaches are different from other people's," said Gilberte, offended.

She was losing some of her sweetness, and, on her return from school, would make some such remark as "My teacher has it in for me!" or complain of not being able to sleep. She was gradually slipping into a state of idleness, which her grandmother noticed, but did nothing to overcome.

One day Gigi was busy applying liquid chalk to her white

canvas button boots, when Gaston Lachaille put in an appearance without ringing the bell. His hair was too long, his complexion sun-tanned, and he was wearing a broad check summer suit. He stopped short in front of Gilberte, who was perched high on a kitchen stool, her left hand shod with a boot.

"Oh! Grandmamma left the key in the door, that's just like her!"

As Gaston Lachaille looked at her without saying a word, she began to blush, put down the boot on the table and pulled her skirt down over her knees.

"So, Tonton, you slip in like a burglar! I believe you're thinner. Aren't you fed properly by that famous chef of yours who used to be with the Prince of Wales? Being thinner makes your eyes look larger, and at the same time makes your nose longer, and—"

"I have something to say to your grandmother," interrupted Gaston Lachaille. "Run into your room, Gigi."

For a moment she remained open-mouthed, then she jumped off her stool. The strong column of her neck, like an archangel's, swelled with anger as she advanced on Lachaille.

"Run into your room! Run into your room! And suppose I said the same to you? Who do you think you are here, ordering me to run into my room? All right, I'm going to my room! And I can tell you one thing; so long as you're in the house, I shan't come out of it!"

She slammed the door behind her, and there was a dramatic click of the bolt.

"Gaston," breathed Madame Alvarez, "I shall insist on the child apologising, yes, I shall insist; if necessary, I'll. . . ."

Gaston was not listening to her, and stood staring at the closed door.

"Now, Mamita," said he, "let us talk briefly and to the point."

"Let us go over it all once again," said Aunt Alicia. "To begin with, you are quite sure he said, 'She shall be spoiled, more than—' "

"Than any woman before her!"

"Yes, but that's the sort of vague phrase that every man comes out with. I like things cut and dried."

"Just what they were, Alicia, for he said that he would guarantee Gigi against every imaginable mishap, even against himself, by an insurance policy; and that he regarded himself more or less as her godfather."

"Yes, hmm . . . Not bad, not bad. But vague, vague as ever."

She was still in bed, her white hair arranged in curls against the pink pillow. She was absent-mindedly tying and untying the ribbon of her night-dress. Madame Alvarez, pale and wan under her morning hat as the moon behind passing clouds, was leaning cross-armed against the bedside.

"And he added, 'I don't wish to rush anything. Above all, I am Gigi's best pal. I shall give her all the time she wants to get used to me.' There were tears in his eyes. And he also said, 'After all, she won't have to deal with a savage.' A gentleman, in fact. A perfect gentleman."

"Yes, yes. Rather a vague gentleman. And the child, have you spoken frankly to her?"

"As was my duty, Alicia. This is no time for us to be treating her like a child from whom the cakes have to be hidden. Yes, I spoke frankly. I referred to Gaston as a miracle, as a god, as—"

"Tut, tut, tut," criticised Alicia, "I should have stressed the difficulties rather: the cards to be played, the fury of all those ladies, the conquest represented by so conspicuous a man."

Madame Alvarez wrung her hands.

"The difficulties! The cards to be played! Do you imagine she's like you? Don't you know her at all? She's very far from calculating, she's—"

"Thank you."

"I mean she has no ambition. I was even struck by the fact that she did not react either one way or the other. No cries of joy, no tears of emotion! All I got from her was, 'Oh, yes! Oh, it's very considerate of him.' Then, only at the very end, did she lay down, as her conditions—"

"Conditions, indeed!" murmured Alicia.

"—that she would answer Monsieur Lachaille's proposals herself, and discuss the matter alone with him. In other words, it was her business, and hers only."

"Let us be prepared for the worst! You've brought a nitwit into the world. She will ask for the moon and, if I know him, she won't get it. He is coming at four o'clock?"

"Yes."

"Hasn't he sent anything? No flowers? No little present?"

"Nothing. Do you think that's a bad sign?"

"No. It's what one would expect. See that the child is nicely dressed. How is she looking?"

"Not too well, today. Poor little lamb—"

"Come, come!" said Alicia heartlessly. "You'll have time for tears another day—when she's succeeded in ruining the whole affair."

"You've eaten scarcely anything, Gigi."

"I wasn't too hungry, Grandmamma. May I have a little more coffee?"

"Of course."

"And a drop of Combier?"

"Why, yes. There's nothing in the world better than Combier for settling the stomach."

Through the open window rose the noise and heat from the street below. Gigi let the tip of her tongue lick round the bottom of her liqueur glass.

"If Aunt Alicia could see you, Gigi!" said Madame Alvarez light-heartedly.

Gigi's only reply was a disillusioned little smile. Her old plaid dress was too tight across the breast, and under the table she stretched out her long legs well beyond the limits of her skirt.

"What can Mamma be rehearsing today that's kept her from coming back to eat with us, Grandmamma? Do you think there really is a rehearsal going on at her Opéra-Comique?"

"She said so, didn't she?"

"Personally, I don't think she wanted to eat here."

"What makes you think that?"

Without taking her eyes off the sunny window, Gigi simply shrugged her shoulders.

"Oh, nothing, Grandmamma."

When she had drained the last drop of her Combiér, she rose and began to clear the table.

"Leave all that, Gigi, I'll do it."

"Why, Grandmamma? I do it as a rule."

She looked Madame Alvarez straight in the face, with an expression the old lady could not meet.

"We began our meal late, it's almost three o'clock and you're not dressed yet; do pull yourself together, Gigi."

"It's never before taken me a whole hour to change my clothes."

"Won't you need my help? Are you satisfied your hair's all right?"

"It will do, Grandmamma. When the door bell rings, don't bother, I'll go and open it."

On the stroke of four, Gaston Lachaille rang three times. A childish, wistful face looked out from the bedroom door, listening. After three more impatient rings, Gilberte advanced as far as the middle of the hall. She still had on her old plaid dress and cotton stockings. She rubbed her cheeks with both fists, then ran to open the door.

"Good afternoon, Uncle Gaston."

"Didn't you want to let me in, you bad girl?"

They bumped shoulders in passing through the door, said "Oh, sorry!" a little too self-consciously, then laughed awkwardly.

"Please sit down, Tonton. D' you know, I didn't have time to change. Not like you! That navy blue serge couldn't look better!"

"You don't know what you're talking about! It's tweed."

"Of course. How silly of me!"

She sat down facing him, pulled her skirt over her knees, and they stared at each other. Gilberte's tomboy assurance deserted her; a strange woebegone look made her blue eyes seem twice their natural size.

"What's the matter with you, Gigi?" asked Lachaille softly.

"Tell me something! Do you know why I'm here?"

She assented with an exaggerated nod.

"Do you want to, or don't you?" he asked, lowering his voice. She pushed a curl behind her ear, and swallowed bravely.

"I don't want to."

Lachaille twirled the tips of his moustache between two fingers, and for a moment looked away from a pair of darkened blue eyes, a pink cheek with a single freckle, curved lashes, a mouth unaware of its power, a heavy mass of ash-gold hair, and a neck as straight as a column, strong, hardly feminine, all of a piece, innocent of jewelry.

"I don't want what you want," Gilberte began again. "You said to Grandmamma . . ."

He put out his hand to stop her. His mouth was slightly twisted to one side, as if he had the toothache.

"I know what I said to your grandmother. It's not worth repeating. Just tell me what it is you don't want. You can then tell me what you do want. I shall give it to you."

"You mean that?" cried Gilberte.

He nodded, letting his shoulders droop, as if tired out. She watched, with surprise, these signs of exhaustion and torment.

"Tonton, you told Grandmamma you wanted to make me my fortune."

"A very fine one," said Lachaille firmly.

"It will be fine if I like it," said Gilberte, no less firmly. "They've drummed into my ears that I am backward for my age, but all the same I know the meaning of words. 'Make me my fortune,' that means I should go away from here with you, and that I should sleep in your bed."

"Gigi, I beg of you!"

She stopped, because of the strong note of appeal in his voice.

"But, Tonton, why should I mind speaking of it to you? You didn't mind speaking of it to Grandmamma. Neither did Grandmamma mind speaking of it to me. Grandmamma wanted me to see nothing but the bright side. But I know more than she told me. I know very well that if you make me my fortune, then I must have my photograph in the papers, go to the Battle of Flowers and to the races at Deauville. When we quarrel, *Gil*

Blas and *Paris en amour* will tell the whole story. When you throw me over once and for all, as you did Gentiane des Cevennes when you'd had enough of her—"

"What! You've heard about that? They've bothered you with all those old stories?"

She gave a solemn little nod.

"Grandmamma and Aunt Alicia. They've taught me that you're world-famous. I know too that Maryse Chuquet stole your letters, and you brought an action against her. I know that Countess Pariewsky was angry with you, because you didn't want to marry a *divorcée*, and she tried to shoot you. I know what all the world knows."

Lachaille put his hand on Gilberte's knee.

"Those are not the things we have to talk about together, Gigi. All that's in the past. All that's over and done with."

"Of course, Tonton, until it begins again. It's not your fault if you're world-famous. But I haven't got a world-famous sort of nature. So it won't do for me."

In pulling at the hem of her skirt, she caused Lachaille's hand to slip off her knee.

"Aunt Alicia and Grandmamma are on your side. But as it concerns me a little, after all, I think you must allow me to say a word on the subject. And my word is, that it won't do for me."

She got up and walked about the room. Gaston Lachaille's silence seemed to embarrass her. She punctuated her wanderings with, "After all, it's true, I suppose! No, it really won't do!"

"I should like to know," said Gaston at last, "whether you're not just trying to hide from me the fact that you dislike me. If you dislike me, you had better say so at once."

"Oh no, Tonton, I don't dislike you at all! I'm always delighted to see you! I'll prove it by making a suggestion in my turn. You could go on coming here as usual, even more often. No one would see any harm in it, since you're a friend of the family. You could go on bringing me liquorice, champagne on my birthdays, and on Sunday we should have an extra special game of piquet. Wouldn't that be a pleasant little life? A life without all this business of sleeping in your bed and everybody

knowing about it, losing strings of pearls, being photographed all the time and having to be so careful."

She was absent-mindedly twisting a strand of hair round her nose, and pulled it so tight that she snuffled and the tip of her nose turned purple.

"A very pretty little life, as you say," interrupted Gaston Lachaille. "You're forgetting one thing only, Gigi, and that is, I'm in love with you."

"Oh!" she cried, "you never told me that."

"Well," he owned uneasily, "I'm telling you now."

She remained standing before him, silent and breathing fast. There was no concealing her embarrassment; the rise and fall of her bosom under the tight bodice, the hectic flush high on her cheeks, and the quivering of her close pressed lips—albeit ready to open again and taste of life.

"That's quite another thing!" she cried at last. "But then you are a terrible man! You're in love with me, and you want to drag me into a life where I'll have nothing but worries, where everyone gossips about everyone else, where the papers print nasty stories. You're in love with me, and you don't care a fig if you let me in for all sorts of horrible adventures, ending in separations, quarrels, Sandomirs, revolvers, and lau . . . and laudanum."

She burst into violent sobs, which made as much noise as a fit of coughing. Gaston put his arms round her to bend her towards him like a branch, but she escaped and took refuge between the wall and the piano.

"But listen, Gigi! Listen to me!"

"Never! I never want to see you again! I should never have believed it of you. You're not in love with me, you're a wicked man! Go away from here!"

She shut him out from sight by rubbing her eyes with closed fists. Gaston had moved over to her and was trying to discover some place on her well guarded face where he could kiss her. But his lips found only the point of a small chin wet with tears. At the sound of sobbing, Madame Alvarez had hurried in. Pale and circumspect, she had stopped in hesitation at the door to the kitchen.

"Good gracious, Gaston!" she said. "What on earth's the matter with her?"

"The matter!" said Lachaille. "The matter is that she doesn't want to."

"She doesn't want to!" repeated Madame Alvarez. "What do you mean, she doesn't want to?"

"No, she doesn't want to. I speak plainly enough, don't I?"

"No. I don't want to," whimpered Gigi.

Madame Alvarez looked at her granddaughter in a sort of terror.

"Gigi! It's enough to drive one raving mad! But I told you, Gigi. Gaston, as God is my witness, I told her—"

"You have told her too much!" cried Lachaille.

He turned his face towards the child, looking just a poor, sad, lovesick creature, but all he saw of her was a slim back shaken by sobs and a disheveled head of hair.

"Oh!" he exclaimed hoarsely, "I've had enough of this!" and he went out, banging the door.

The next day, at three o'clock, Aunt Alicia, summoned by *pneumatique*, stepped out from her hired brougham. She climbed the stairs up to the Alvarez' floor—pretending to the shortness of breath proper to someone with a weak heart—and noiselessly pushed open the door which her sister had left on the latch.

"Where's the child?"

"In her room. Do you want to see her?"

"There's plenty of time. How is she?"

"Very calm."

Alicia shook two angry little fists.

"Very calm! She has pulled the roof down about our heads, and she is very calm! These young people of today!"

Once again she raised her spotted veil and withered her sister with a single glance.

"And you, standing there, what do you propose doing?"

With a face like a crumpled rose, she sternly confronted the large pallid face of her sister, whose retort was mild in the extreme.

"What do I propose doing? How do you mean? I can't, after all, tie the child up!" Her burdened shoulders rose on a long sigh. "I surely have not deserved such children as these!"

"While you stand there wringing your hands, Lachaille has rushed away from here and in such a state that he may do something idiotic!"

"And even without his straw hat," said Madame Alvarez. "He got into his motor bare-headed! The whole street might have seen him!"

"If I were to be told that by this time he's already become engaged, or is busy making it up with Liane, it would not surprise me in the least!"

"It is a moment fraught with destiny," said Madame Alvarez lugubriously.

"And afterwards, how did you speak to that little brat?"

Madame Alvarez pursed her lips.

"Gigi may be a bit scatter-brained in certain things and backward for her age, but she's not what you say. A young girl who has held the attention of Monsieur Lachaille is not a little brat."

A furious shrug of the shoulders set Alicia's black lace quivering.

"All right, all right! With all due respect, then, how did you handle your precious princess?"

"I talked sense to her. I spoke to her of the family. I tried to make her understand that we sink or swim together. I enumerated all the things she could do for herself and for us."

"And what about nonsense? Did you talk nonsense to her? Didn't you talk to her of love, travel, moonlight, Italy? You must know how to harp on every string. Didn't you tell her that on the other side of the world the sea is phosphorescent, that there are humming-birds in all the flowers, and that you make love under gardenias in full bloom beside a moonlit fountain?"

Madame Alvarez looked at her spirited elder sister with sadness in her eyes.

"I couldn't tell her all that, Alicia, because I know nothing about it. I've never been further afield than Cabourg and Monte Carlo."

"Aren't you capable of inventing it?"

"No, Alicia."

Both fell silent. Alicia, with a gesture, made up her mind.

"Call the chit in to me. We shall see."

When Gilberte came in, Aunt Alicia had resumed all the airs and graces of a frivolous old lady and was smelling the tea-rose pinned near her chin.

"Good afternoon, my little Gigi."

"Good afternoon, Aunt Alicia."

"What is this Inez has been telling me? You have an admirer? And *what* an admirer! For your first attempt, it's a master-stroke!"

Gilberte acquiesced with a guarded, resigned little smile. She offered to Alicia's darting curiosity a fresh young face, to which the violet-blue shadow on her eyelids and the high color of her mouth gave an almost artificial effect. For coolness' sake, she had dragged back the hair off her temples with the help of two combs, and this drew up the corners of her eyes.

"And it seems you have been playing the naughty girl, and tried your claws on Monsieur Lachaille! Bravo, my brave little girl!"

Gilberte raised incredulous eyes to her aunt.

"Yes, indeed! Bravo! It will only make him all the happier when you are nice to him again."

"But I am nice to him, Aunt. Only, I don't want to, that's all."

"Yes, yes, we know. You've sent him packing to his sugar refinery, that's perfect. But don't send him to the Devil, he's quite capable of going. The fact is, you don't love him."

Gilberte gave a little childish shrug.

"Yes, Aunt, I'm very fond of him."

"Just what I said, you don't love him. Mind you, there's no harm in that, it leaves you free to act as you please. Ah, if you'd been head over heels in love with him, then I should have been a little anxious. Lachaille is a fine figure of a man. Well built—you've only to look at the photographs of him taken at Deauville in bathing costume. He's famous for that. Yes, I should feel sorry for you, my poor Gigi. To start by having a passionate love-affair—to go away all by your two selves to the other side of the world, forgetting everything in the arms of the man who

adores you, listening to the song of love in an eternal spring—surely things of that sort must touch your heart! What does all that say to you?”

“It says to me that when the eternal spring is over Monsieur Lachaille will go off with another lady. Or else that the lady—me if you like—will leave Monsieur Lachaille, and Monsieur Lachaille will hurry off to blab the whole story. And then the lady, still me if you like, will have nothing else to do but get into another gentleman’s bed. I don’t want that. I’m not changeable by nature, indeed I’m not.”

She crossed her arms over her breasts and shivered slightly.

“Grandmamma, may I have a *cachet faivre*? I want to go to bed, I feel cold.”

“You great goose!” burst out Aunt Alicia, “a silly little milliner’s shop is all you deserve! Be off, go and marry a bank clerk!”

“If you wish it, Aunt. But I want to go to bed.”

Madame Alvarez put her hand on Gigi’s forehead.

“Don’t you feel well?”

“I’m all right, Grandmamma. Only I’m sad.”

She leaned her head on Madame Alvarez’ shoulder, and, for the first time in her life, closed her eyes pathetically like a grown woman. The two sisters exchanged glances.

“You must know, my Gigi,” said Madame Alvarez, “that we won’t torment you to that extent. If you say you really don’t want to—”

“A failure is a failure,” said Alicia caustically. “We can’t go on discussing it for ever.”

“You’ll never be able to say you didn’t have good advice and the very best at that,” said Madame Alvarez.

“I know, Grandmamma, but I’m sad, all the same.”

“Why?”

A tear trickled over Gilberte’s downy cheek without wetting it, but she did not answer. A brisk peal of the door bell made her jump where she stood.

“Oh, it must be him,” she said, “It is him! Grandmamma, I don’t want to see him! Hide me, Grandmamma!”

At the low, passionate tone of her voice, Aunt Alicia raised an attentive head, and pricked an expert ear. Then she ran to

open the door and came back a moment later. Gaston Lachaille, haggard, his eyes bloodshot, followed close behind her.

"Good afternoon, Mamita. Good afternoon, Gigi!" he said airily. "Please don't move, I've come to retrieve my straw hat."

None of the three women replied, and his assurance left him.

"Well, you might at least say a word to me, even if it's only How-d'you-do?"

Gilberte took a step towards him.

"No," she said, "You've not come to retrieve your straw hat. You have another one in your hand. And you would never bother about a hat. You've come to make me more miserable than ever."

"Really!" burst out Madame Alvarez. "This is more than I can stomach. How can you, Gigi! Here is a man who, out of the goodness of his generous heart—"

"If you please, Grandmamma, just a moment, and I shall have finished."

Instinctively she straightened her dress, adjusted the buckle of her sash, and marched up to Gaston.

"I've been thinking, Gaston. In fact, I've been thinking a great deal—"

He interrupted her, to stop her saying what he was afraid to hear.

"I swear to you, my darling—"

"No, don't swear to me. I've been thinking I would rather be miserable with you than without you. So . . ."

She tried twice to go on.

"So . . . There you are. How d'you do, Gaston, how d'you do?"

She offered him her cheek, in her usual way. He held her, a little longer than usual, until he felt her relax, and become calm and gentle in his arms. Madame Alvarez seemed about to hurry forward, but Alicia's impatient little hand restrained her.

"Leave well alone. Don't meddle any more. Can't you see she is far beyond us?"

She pointed to Gigi, who was resting a trusting head and the rich abundance of her hair on Lachaille's shoulder.

The happy man turned to Madame Alvarez.

"Mamita," he said, "will you do me the honour, the favour, give me the infinite joy of bestowing on me the hand. . . ."

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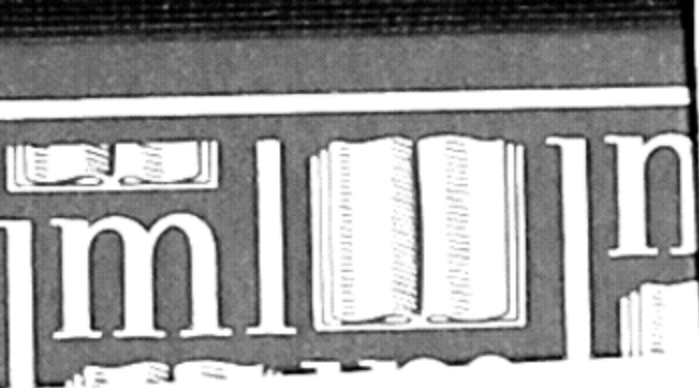
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